

**SPACES FOR INTERPRETATION:
STORY TELLING IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION AND VISUAL ART**

by

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Abstract

There is an innate human drive to share stories of self. In this thesis, I explore the idea of creating autobiographical fiction through written and visual art forms. A key challenge is how to tell a story based on a life event without disrespecting actual people or distorting recollected events. I begin by considering the concept of autobiography, the nature of memory, its close relationship to fiction, and the relationship between these, identity, and storytelling. I discuss the possibility of a more complete understanding of the story being told when an author also employs an alternate narrative form. Using myself as a subject, I engage in a form of autoethnography to create fictional short stories that have an autobiographical thread. Each story is accompanied by a work of visual art as further narration of the same story. I conclude by suggesting that using the two narrative forms of written and visual art provides an individual with the opportunity for an alternative perspective, which allows for a more clear understanding of self and position in the world.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures	iv
Acknowledgement	v
Dedication	vi
Theoretical Introduction: Story Telling in Autobiographical Fiction and Visual Art	1
Creative Component:	
Chapter One: Peeled	23
Chapter Two: Silver Clouds.....	36
Chapter Three: How to Tune a Bandura	49
Chapter Four: Saving Sophia	64
Chapter Five: The Artist Project	74
Chapter Six: Feeding Birds	844
Works Cited	92

List of Figures

Fig. 1. <i>Peeled</i>	34
Fig. 2. <i>Feeding Time at Dusk</i>	35
Fig. 3. <i>Silver Clouds</i>	48
Fig. 4. <i>Nemesis</i>	63
Fig. 5. <i>Untitled – Study for Saving Sophia</i>	72
Fig. 6. <i>Saving Sophia</i>	73
Fig. 7. <i>The Artist Project</i>	83
Fig. 8. <i>The Offering</i>	91

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Lawrence, for his unwavering support, love, and willingness to be my sounding board/idea-man for so many years.

Theoretical Introduction: Story Telling in Autobiographical Fiction and Visual Art

The region between autobiographical fiction and visual art can offer a space for an alternative interpretation of a story, and potentially lead to a more thorough understanding of identity. The ensuing discussion examines the innate human drive to share stories of self, which can be seen as a way of navigating identity and meaning in one's own world. A visible trend in the desire to express representations of self is evident in the surge of memoirs and autobiographies available in bookstores, and the increased sharing of personal stories and images of self through social media sites. These forms can all be seen as modalities of self-narration created for others to consume. With the proliferation of "radical[ly] new opportunities for self-presentation, and perhaps, some observers think, new modes of selfhood" (Eakin, *Living* 94), the methods we choose to present our stories are indicators of our identities. The ways in which our narratives are performed can be seen as reflections of the societal culture we experience. This thought is reflected in anthropologist Heewong Chang's claim that "the growing popularity of contemporary self-narratives rides on the back of postmodernism that values voices of common people, defying the conventional authoritative elitism of autobiography" (32). She regards stories of self "as cultural texts through which the cultural understanding of self and others can be gained" (Chang 13), and notes that "The variety of self-narratives only attests to their increased recognition in humanities and social sciences" (41). This indicates that self-narratives can be used to study contemporary society from many perspectives.

There is value in Chang's observation that the proliferation of self-narratives provides validation for the voices of all people; however there is also merit in questioning the immediacy of storytelling that technology provides. Author Jeanette Winterson claims that "media ransacks the arts . . . which both deadens our sensibilities and makes us fear what is

not instant, approachable, consumable” (15-16). It is worth considering that there is benefit to slowing down and examining the mode of telling a story of self.

In the past, discussions of autobiographical modes have focussed on what can be considered truth or fiction, social accountability, privilege, and the role that memory plays in the construction of a self-narrative. Autobiographical writing has been the primary zone of exploration, with limited focus on the rapidly expanding variety of genres resulting from this age of constant connection. I will be entering this conversation from the perspective of exploring the connection between autobiographical fiction and visual art as an alternative form of self-representation.

Including the term autobiography implies that I will be employing the collection of self-reflective data. Within the cultural context of creating fiction based on autobiographical events, I will inevitably be engaging in autoethnography. Chang describes autoethnography as benefitting “from the thought that self is an extension of a community . . . the possibility of cultural self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community” (26). The reverse is also true with the regards to the exploration of autobiographical fiction. It is inevitable that a cultural component will be encountered within the interiority of identity. Chang notes that “The view of others is not fixed in people’s lives. Rather, the positionality of self to others is socially constructed and transformable as the self develops its relationships to others—especially strangers and enemies—and reframes its views of others” (29). The interactions remembered between an individual and others changes over time and can be seen as indicators of cultural and social constructions which affect an individual’s evolving identity. Recognition of the potential power dynamic created by contemporary culture in the development of one’s identity allows the writer to be fully conscious when creating stories,

to question him or herself as to why a story is told, and “how much say do we have in fashioning what we have to say?” (Eakin, *Living* 102).

In relation to modern literature, autobiography has been described as ambiguous and resistant to categorization. Max Saunders extensively explored the blurred connection between autobiography and other narrative forms. He claims that “autobiography and fiction, while posed as mutually exclusive, are in fact profoundly interdependent” (Saunders 21), since using autobiography as a narrative strategy “constantly push[es] towards the limits of self understanding” (10). The interrelationship between autobiography and fiction can camouflage recollected events or experiences, and provide a sense of freedom. Fictionalization allows the writer to put on a mask and write stories based on memory in a manner that is not threatening to identity, allowing for a closer reading of self. The performative nature of autobiographical fiction, and its subsequent ability to act as camouflage “offers better evidence of the self as created through role-playing, since its writers are consciously and deliberately shifting into shapes of other subjectivities, and thus revealing the performance involved in the achievement of any subjectivity” (Saunders 528).

The use of fiction in autobiographical writing not only supports the writer with the ability to role play, but it also accommodates the fluid nature of memory. In his research into the genre of autobiographical writing, Paul John Eakin asserts that the “stories we tell about the past are in fact extended metaphors for stories we are living out in the present” (24), and that these stories are continually in flux. Helen M. Buss, in her investigation into autobiography, claims that “the autobiographical act describes only an illusive, unstable version of a self that did not exist before the act of writing and has little reference to the writer in his ongoing life” (4). This instability and fluidity described by Buss and Eakin, offers a favourable environment for allowing performance in the creation of stories in a

positive and safe space. Eakin concurs with John D. Barbour, who claims “He must make himself absent in order to find himself there” (Barbour 76). The understanding here is that there is a perceived safety for the writer, and by extension also for the players in the writer’s life, in exploring potential fictionalized stories that have been developed through one’s memory of life events.

There is physiological evidence to support the idea that exact recall of a past event is impossible, and thus fiction is an expected addition to memory. Eakin asks the question “Can past experience be repeated, or is it necessarily—psychologically and neurologically—*constructed* anew in each memory event or act of recall?” (Eakin, “Autobiography, Identity” 292). He shows evidence that “The latest developments in brain science confirm the extent to which memory, the would-be anchor of selves and lives, constructs materials from the past than an earlier, more innocent view would have us believe it merely stored. Israel Rosenfeld (1988) argues that memories share the constructed nature of all brain events: ‘recollection is a kind of perception . . . and every context will alter the nature of what is recalled’” (291). In terms of navigating memory then, it is essential that the act of remembering is recognized as “a revisionist faculty, a maker of fictions” (Eakin, “Autobiography as Cosmogram” 24). Memory makes the landscape of today a variation of the landscape of yesterday. There are subtle changes to a remembered story each time it is evoked. Eakin substantiates this claim by stating that “Advances in brain imaging—PET scans and fMRIS—reveal that every time we have the sense of recalling the ‘same’ event from the past, that memory is constructed anew, and different areas of the brain may be involved in each act of recall” (Schacter and Squire cited in Eakin, “Autobiography as Cosmogram” 26). Eakin exposes the “supreme fiction of memory as fact” and claims that the act of remembering is not the same experience

each time (“Autobiography, Identity” 301). Understanding this principle is important because it allows a story to be told, knowing that truths inevitably include fiction.

The use of an individual’s memory as a source for fictionalized stories remains problematic, however. Ethical considerations inevitably arise when navigating the dilemma of how to represent individuals who are characters in the writer’s life. The question then becomes, who is the owner of these stories? Not only is the question about who has ownership with regards to privacy and social responsibility, society and culture are implicated as well. Is my ability to explore the subject of autobiographical fiction and other narrative forms merely a cultural reflection of my privileged position within society? Is society the primary owner of my stories?

Eakin explores this issue, asking “is it capitalism that accounts for the potentially jarring linkage of inner states to material possessions?” (*Living* 93). He discusses the observations of architect Witold Rybczynski, and notes that “modern autobiography . . . seems to have emerged concurrently with—and is perhaps a symbolic manifestation of—people’s acquisition of a distinctly personal space in which to live, rooms of their own” (91) in which an individual can use ‘leisure’ time “to set down their thoughts” (92). As a Canadian woman of eastern European descent, arguably in the privileged position of being able to partake in graduate studies, I can be seen as a member of the bourgeois society described by Eakin and Rybczynski. In her iconic essay, *A Room of One’s Own* (1928), Virginia Woolf discussed the topic of women and writing, stating that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). She criticized the male privilege to education and potential for financial independence, and called for women to write “even in poverty and obscurity,” so that the women of the future would have their voices heard (106). With financial security and the ‘leisure’ time that would result, along with private personal

space, Woolf argued that only then would it be possible for women to have “freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think” and the realization that “we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women . . . [then] the opportunity will come” (106). Although Woolf’s essay was written in 1928, the connection between financial security and creativity arguably continues to apply in the 21st century.

Eakin goes further and cites philosopher Ian Hacking’s assertions that “the Industrial Revolution ushered in a paradigm shift in the Western concept of the person,” allowing for “what Michel Foucault calls the constitution of subjects,” (*Living* 97) and Foucault’s concepts on power relations. The idea that I am a participant in a constructed cultural and societal power dynamic is both interesting and disturbing to me, although it does encourage careful thought when writing stories. There is the necessity to look closely at motivational factors when choosing what story to tell, and how to tell it. There is a level of power struggle, which “applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize” (Foucault 331).

Being fully cognizant of the potential implications—both cultural and societal—of choosing to tell a fictionalized story based on personal memory, how is an individual able to tell a story of self? The process of drawing from life experience to create and share meaningful stories “has great value, [but] it also has painful costs, which a responsible moral agent will seek, if possible, to minimize” (Mills 117). Engaging in an act of self-narration requires that writers, “like other researchers of human subjects, are charged with adhering to the ethical principle of confidentiality. This inquiry method requires researchers to adopt creative strategies in practicing the principle” (Chang 56). Writing stories of fictionalized autobiography is arguably one way to accomplish this. Fiction, however, is not a fool-proof

strategy to deal with the issue of implicating real people in a story based on an individual's life events. At times, authors have had to endure "the self-inflicted wounds caused by [the] publication," and have been characterized as "thieves and magpies" when writing stories based on remembered events (Drabble 134). There are, of course, those who are considered masters of respectful borrowing. Woolf, for example, demonstrated her ability to write novels "with compassionate understanding of characters who, in 'real life,' might have been (and often were) the subjects of her mockery and wit" (133). With regards to the autobiographies of Canadian women writers, Buss states that "The kind of personal and casual critique a writer gets when she has written an admittedly autobiographical work is much more challenging to her notions of self than are those received by a fiction writer who can deflect disturbing comments by the claim that, after all, she has written fiction, can leave anyone out, include anyone she wishes" (155). From the perspective of someone attempting to write stories of self, why would anyone risk claiming their writing as autobiographical? It would seem that autobiography is, in fact, an impossibility, and to claim a story as historical truth seems questionable.

My intention has been to explore the concept of the interconnectedness between autobiography and fiction within the creative component of my thesis. It includes the compilation of fictionalized short stories that have an autobiographical thread, juxtaposed with visual narratives of the same stories. With the aforementioned personal, societal and cultural implications of representing real people (myself included) in a fictionalized form, I have strived to reach an ethical balance between telling a good story and being discrete.

With regard to the visual art component of this project, the assumption could be made that if a writer is to make meaning of her world, more than one perspective from which to view it would be advantageous. I argue that the use of other narrative forms as alternative

perspectives to represent a single story, creates the potential for an enhanced level of comprehension. Therefore, writers who also explore their narratives through visual art can be seen as having a more complex understanding of the story being told. Susan Sontag has suggested that there is a gap in literature, and that “In the place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (13). A possible interpretation of this thought is that with the support of an author’s own visual narrative of a written story, a zone is created that is capable of providing an enriched level of understanding, and could be seen as addressing the gap described by Sontag.

Jeanette Winterson wrote about the connection between visual art and herself as a writer in her 1995 collection of essays called *Art Objects*. Although not a visual artist, Winterson acquired a love of art and wrote about how it changed her perception of writing and the world. She acknowledges, “I still know far far less about pictures than I do about books and this will not change. What has changed is my way of seeing. I am learning how to look at pictures. What has changed is my capacity of feeling” (6-7). The ability for any work of visual art to induce a sense of what is real to an individual is difficult to fully explain. There is, however, an inescapable truth that individuals identify at some level with art, be it a child’s crayon drawing, or a painting on a gallery wall. The artwork may trigger a memory, a thought, a feeling. Winterson describes the situation of when she “think[s] of something I did, the picture catches me, adds to the thought, changes the meaning of thought and past. The totality of the picture comments on the totality of what I am” (19). Visual art, in Winterson’s description, adds to a person’s sense of identity.

Who can claim to have seen a painting, drawing, or a work of graffiti, for example, and not experienced a sudden stoppage in time at least once in their life? There is something about those specific works that demands the viewer pause and listen. However, with

technology's constant bombardment of fast moving images providing vast amounts of visual information at high speeds, the careful consideration of one static image is not an everyday experience.

Some time ago, I found myself racing through the National Gallery of Canada—I only had one afternoon to cover that mammoth space—attempting to see first-hand as much original artwork as possible. I was stopped in my tracks when confronted by Tom Thomson's *Northern River*. I had seen this painting many times in books and so was especially familiar with the work. I was absolutely blindsided by the impact the painting made when I could see the colours and brushstrokes from my own view-point. When observing an original painting, as opposed to a reproduction, new meaning can be found. The chosen medium and surface for a work of visual art exist as narrative modes in themselves. The creation of a painting is a "probability landscape. A brushstroke, a drip, a line are decisions made against the backdrop of all other possible marks not made—not just in the sense of pentimenti and underdrawing but as characteristic choices, as style" (Brunton 119). Standing in front of Thomson's painting, a new story was being told to me. It was impossible to simply take a cursory look and move on, which surprised me. I live in northern British Columbia, and although the painting was done in Ontario's Algonquin Park, I could identify with Thomson's representation of the beauty he saw there. This was an extended moment that, for me, solidified my perception of myself as a northerner. I did not just have reverence for the painting, but a better understanding of how I identify myself.

The variety of genres in which narratives can be represented speaks to its flexibility "as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images" (Barthes 79). Looking at visual art as a narrative text, the possibility of it existing as an alternative language and viewpoint can be

seen as adding substance to narratives as a whole. Roland Barthes noted that “From the moment of the appearance of the book, the linking of text and image is frequent, though it seems to have been little studied from a structural point of view . . . Does the image duplicate certain of the informations given in the text by a phenomenon of redundancy or does the text add a fresh information to the image?” (38). Barthes’ discussion is within the context of examining the contributions of someone’s illustrations to someone else’s story, however the same questions can be asked with respect to my project. As the author of a story who also produces a visual representation of the same story, am I merely performing an act of redundancy? Barthes claims that “text . . . and image stand in a complementary relationship; the words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more generally syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level” (41). Both narrative forms are given equal weight, and each is able to stand alone. Barthes argued that the use of the image in conjunction with textual narrative “permits the consideration of a veritable ontology of the process of signification” (32). By combining works of autobiographical fiction and visual art, the boundary of potential meaning is expanded.

Visual art can be seen as acting parallel to fictionalization, thus placing it as another strategy by which to enact a story—one narrative form supplementing another. The term ‘supplementing’ insinuates that the work of visual art is not necessary and would merely exist as a non-essential appendage. Saunders claimed that “Life writing is fundamentally intertextual,” and that stories from memory can be told in various forms (5). He argues the thought of one narrative being supplemental to the other as “a paradoxical notion, since what needs supplementing is incomplete; in which case the supplement is essential to its completion” (517). Together, the two narrative forms create space for negotiation between different perspectives which helps to make sense of the object; a space where new meanings

can be read. Writing fictionalized stories from memory paired with visual narratives “gives way to a view of the self as constructed in the process of expression” (502). Saunders makes a significant point when he states that, “just as criticism is sceptical that a single narrative can be reduced to a single meaning, so it knows how a single experience is representable by more than a single narrative” (508). This balances well with my own perception of writing and painting; there is always another way to tell a story.

If fiction and visual art are both considered performances, then there is the allowance for the possibility of exploring selfhood through role playing. Saunders noted that writers are increasingly creating fiction within their autobiographies “because the shift towards fiction helped them to express it better, and thus to counter anxiety and despair” (528). The story read by others, will be interpreted in ways that cannot be anticipated. The freedom the reader has to interpret a work of creative writing in accordance with their own developed identity, reciprocally allows the writer freedom to create, understanding that the reader will never completely know the author’s full meaning. This also translates to flexibility in terms of the viewer’s perception of a work of art. Barthes recognized that “all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others” (38-39). The artist’s intention cannot be fully recognized by the viewer, who brings his or her own identity markers into play with the interpretation of an artwork. As I discovered in my viewing of the Tom Thomson painting, the possibility arises that something valuable about a person’s own identity will be learned, even if the viewer has no insight to the specifics of Thomson’s own identity when he painted *Northern River*.

The use of visual art in the exploration of personal identity has cultural implications. As noted earlier in the discussion of Chang’s commentary on autoethnography, it is inevitable that societal-cultural influences have a direct effect on the development and

discovery of identity. The choice of an art form used to tell a story of self can be seen as having links to the culture in which an individual is immersed. As a Ukrainian-Canadian, my childhood included a concerted effort by my immigrant family to educate me in Ukrainian language, culture, and traditions. My grandfather was a visual artist in Ukraine when World War II erupted. He escaped with his wife and three children to Canada, and was able to continue painting the Byzantine-style portraits of religious figures that I grew up thinking everyone had in their homes. He has painted commissions for Ukrainian Catholic cathedrals all across Canada, some of which were installed in Prince George, British Columbia, many years before I made my home here. My grandfather was also a prolific painter of landscapes and portraits, and I believe that my passion for painting is partly a result from the exposure I have had to it since childhood. I learned then that there were other ways to explore the world and interpret what I saw.

Chang uses the term “border-crossings” to describe experiences that place an individual in unfamiliar territories, and that it is these episodes that have the potential to bring broader insight into identity. I argue that the ‘border-crossing’ between visual art and written stories acts in the same manner. There is the necessity to adjust the way an individual thinks and perceives when attempting to create a narrative in different forms. Chang expands on the proverb ‘one picture is worth a thousand words,’ stating that it “implies that a visual image can convey a message more efficiently and powerfully than a series of words. The power of visualization as a communication tool is enhanced by the simplicity and succinctness of a visual image into which complex texts are condensed and captured” (81). She endorses the approach of researchers putting “creative energy into a portion or the entirety of [their] autoethnographies,” claiming that the use of imagination is an effective method to explore connection between self and culture (148).

With this project, I have attempted to explore the gap between perspectives in literature as described by Sontag, and have pursued a cross-disciplinary approach to narratives. I am interested in the ways people create engaging stories based on life events. There is the adage told in creative writing classes, to ‘write what you know.’ In theory I should know myself better than anyone else. I have a lifetime of experiences that translates to stories. In using myself as a subject in this project, I am engaging in an investigation of how well I actually do know myself. Having said that, the stories I wrote have proven to be, for me, far more difficult to compose than I had originally imagined.

My motivation for creating fictional stories about specific remembered events was at times troubling, and it took energy to navigate the challenges that resulted in how I saw myself. In the past, I have identified as wife, mother, physiotherapist, runner, artist, and more recently, writer. These were the main points, the deeper aspects of which I had not actually given much conscious consideration. It was interesting for me to discover that I did not automatically include my identity as daughter or sister to the whole, and that stories based on these aspects of my identity proved to be the most challenging to form. I found that there was the sense of freedom described by Eakin in creating fictional stories based on a past truth, and a sense of relief that resulted from the knowledge that it was not possible for my recalling of an event to exist as the one *true* account. Finding the words to put down on paper then became an achievable goal. I was able to appreciate Winterson’s observation that “If we can fictionalize ourselves, and consciously, we are freed into a new kind of communication. It is abstract, light, changeful, genuine. It is what Wordsworth called ‘the real solid world of images.’ It may be that to understand ourselves as fictions, is to understand ourselves as fully as we can” (60).

Each of my written narratives is accompanied by a work of visual art that offers an alternative mode of narration. I have been an artist for the majority of my life, and have experience with a variety of mediums. However, I tend to gravitate toward oil paint on canvas, which can be seen as a marker of my identity as an artist. The way oil paint moves on canvas and its delayed drying time suits my nature and artistic process. As a narrative, a work of visual art such as an oil painting, involves the careful construction also required in the writing of an engaging story, and the two forms together can be seen as complementary.

In my career as a painter, I have found that the subjects I choose tend to be flashes in time that catch my attention from the periphery. The colours in the bark of a decaying tree stump, the way the hand changes shape as a cellist grasps his bow—these have been the subjects of my work. Observing a subject from the periphery allows for a new meaning, an unsuspected beauty to suddenly appear. The most extraordinary subjects show up, where at first glance, there was nothing. Visual art can be seen as an exercise in the development of the ability to observe from atypical perspectives, translating to the skills required by a creative writer.

Helen M. Buss explored the creative modes used by artist Emily Carr, stating that Carr “is a most amazing though largely unrecognized phenomenon in Canadian literature” (157). Carr did not begin writing until her 60’s, and Buss recognizes that “Carr’s unique sense of form developed as a painter, were transferred to her writing choices, and the stylistic variations of her writing offer a rich ground for speculation about the generic locations of women’s autobiography” (158). Although Carr’s writing falls within the genre of autobiography, she used strategies such as switching the narrator’s point of view, and “events are reshaped and interpreted to make a point in a story rather than to provide documentation (Shadbolt 12). This can be seen as telling the story from alternative perspectives, thus

allowing for alternative interpretations. Critic Georgeann Murphy also discussed the significance of point of view with regards to the short stories of Alice Munro, claiming that “Who tells the story is as important as how it is told, and Munro takes great care over point of view, frequently writing a story from both third-and-first person points of view before coming to a final decision about what is best” (21). Both Carr and Munro made decisions about the perspective a story would be told from, the basis of which cannot be truly be known by the reader.

Many authors build a fictional story based on life events. Murphy described how “To an extraordinary extent, the raw material of [Alice] Munro’s work comes from her own life, a fact she readily admits” (12). This is a recurring theme noted in the collection of critical essays edited by Mickey Pearlman on the subject of Canadian women writers of fiction. The concepts of “memory, family, and space resonated . . . the issue of identity was the linchpin” (Pearlman 4) within the fictional stories of authors such as Alice Munro, or Margaret Atwood. When addressing the question of how much of a story is based on a writer’s own experience, Winterson states that

It seems to me that the intersection between a writer’s life and a writer’s work is irrelevant to the reader. The reader is not being offered a chunk of the writer or a direct insight into the writer’s mind, the reader is being offered a separate reality. A reality separate from the actual world of the reader, and just as importantly, separate from the actual world of the writer. (27-28)

The inspiration for the story may come from an individual’s life, however, that fact is immaterial to the story itself or how a reader interprets the author’s work. The writer is

allowed freedom to create a fictionalized story that may have truths a reader would not be privy to.

With the thought that stories arising from memory will change over time, I have written a series of fictional stories that have an autobiographical thread. Although it could be argued that these stories are a form of *Bildungsroman*, it has not been my intention to catalogue the development of my education into various aspects of personal identity. Rather, it has been an exploration into how to create a story, which has at its core, a portion of a life-truth. Writing fiction based on a life experience allows the writer to explore aspects of identity that perhaps had not been considered previously. Choosing to tell the story from either first or third person point of view has been a strategy that I also have experimented with, and have noted the subtle changes in each story that each voice provides.

The term anamorphosis describes a situation where the true nature of an object can only be seen when it is viewed from an alternative perspective. Slavoj Žižek discussed this optical effect where “the object can be perceived only when it is viewed from the side, in a partial, distorted form, as its own shadow—if we cast a direct glance at it we see nothing, a mere void” (2413). The point of this observation is that a shift in perspective, an object viewed through a different lens, results in “the difference seen in the object . . . which can constitute the Real, rather than a presence or an absence” (Hubble quoted in Saunders 526). The argument here is that there is the possibility of more truth or reality in the masks we wear than there is concealed behind the mask. Viewing the written narrative directly provides a certain level of understanding, but the challenge of using a different lens will provide a closer approximation of the Real in a newly created zone of hybridity.

There are examples of writers combining their ability to tell stories along with their own works of visual art: graphic novels are a prime example that comes to mind. There are

many genres in the graphic novel format, but for the purposes of this project, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* fits within the parameters of an autobiographically based project that involves both literary and visual art from the author. *Maus* was published in 1973 as a two volume graphic novel, and was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992 (Adams n.pag.). It is the only graphic novel to ever receive this distinction. In the making of *Maus*, Spiegelman uses taped interviews he did with his father, Vladek, to reconstruct the story of how Vladek and his wife Anja survived the Holocaust.

Maus is in essence, a story within a story with "two narrative strands weaving past and present" (Adams n.pag.). Spiegelman attempts to recreate the horrors experienced by his parents during the Nazi-era occupation of Poland, as well as "the fraught relationships between Spiegelman, his difficult father and their tortured past (including the 1968 death, by suicide, of Spiegelman's mother, Anja)" (Adams n. pag.). Spiegelman was not alive at the time, but Vladek and Anja's first child, Richieu, did not survive the escape from Poland. The younger Spiegelman's novel then is also the story of being a son born in the United States, to immigrant refugees. It is both his exploration of his identity and family connection, as well as Vladek's story of survival.

In *Maus*, Spiegelman uses his father's actual name as well as his own and the names of other players in the story, so there is none of the protective action of fictionalization previously discussed. It is, however, an example of the use of role playing to deal with challenging subject matter. He uses anthropomorphism as a strategy in his writing, representing the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats, and the Polish as pigs. In the drawings, there are images of different animals wearing the actual physical masks of others as they try to navigate their way through that terrible time. *Maus* also demonstrates the unreliability of memory as Spiegelman struggles in documenting his father's rambling story that is so often

not in chronological order and has certain vital information forgotten and then suddenly remembered.

There are drawings in the novel that are able to stand on their own as works of art, but in general the written and visual texts are dependent upon each other for the story to be fully told. Spiegelman did a self portrait in 1989, titled *Self Portrait with Maus Mask*, showing Spiegelman with a mask tied onto his face, sitting at his drawing table with his hands holding up his head, and he has an expression of sadness on his face. There is a guard tower seen outside the window with a soldier aiming his gun at Spiegelman's head. Much can be read in the image alone, but alongside the "giant 500-pound mouse chasing me through a cave, the monument to my father that casts a shadow over my life," the image takes on new meaning (qtd. in Samuels n. pag.), and the expansion of the boundary for potential signification, as described by Barthes, is evident here.

In my own process of producing different narrative versions, it was my intention to focus on one story at a time. In reality this has proven to be far more challenging than I had anticipated. There is likely a reason why writers who are also visual artists do not combine the two art forms into one more often. The level of concentration required in continually switching back and forth between perspectives requires much time and patience. Perhaps this is yet another marker of my identity, in that ample time for the careful consideration of each perspective, is an essential element of my creative process. In my defence, Spiegelman's *Maus* took him thirteen years to produce, so apparently this is not an idiosyncratic need of mine alone. This does not change the fact that there are timelines that need to be adhered to, and my choice of medium in visual art does not translate into images being produced quickly. As a result, I have had to modify some aspects of my work. Instead of linseed oil, I chose to use liquin as an agent for thinning the oil paint and significantly decreasing its drying time. I

am most comfortable painting in larger scale, which also does not translate to producing images within a few weeks or months. I have also modified this, and have produced much smaller paintings. Again, this has pushed me out of my comfort zone which, although challenging, does result in artistic boundaries being expanded.

An unforeseen difficulty has been my tendency to approach subject matter for my paintings quite literally, and I have been surprisingly confused as to how to represent each story. A work of visual art that is constructed by memory has challenges with regards to composition. In the past I have used drawings done on site along with photographs from which to draw reference when creating a final composition in studio. Other than the rare found photograph of past events or drawings done in an attempt to recreate a scene, I have not had these hard reference points from which to navigate my process. However, 'necessity is the mother of invention,' and I staged constructions with collage, still-life set ups, and photographs that are not related to the story at hand to create a composition for reference. In this way I used an alternate perspective through a different lens, as per the earlier discussion on anamorphosis.

The issue then became what was the one critical piece of each story that I could represent through visual art. I vacillated between figuratively showing what was happening in the story, illustrating the narrative it as it were, and trying to express the emotion that each story generated for me. It became difficult to produce just one image, and at this point I am not sure that it can be done in every situation. "Peeled" has two paintings that represent different significant components of the story. It is a story that was especially difficult for me to write as it involved early childhood memories. Creating an alternate narrative form to represent it was no less challenging. "Silver Clouds" also has multiple painting and drawing versions, but this was a result of my uncertainty as to what aspect of the story would best be

represented on canvas. Creating a work for “Feeding Birds” was more successful, possibly because I decided to paint it on found wood and tin plates, and used images from magazines to make the compilations from which I could create a painted version. There was the sense of role playing involved in that particular exercise and not a representation that drew a line directly back to me: a level of fun existed that was not present with the others. “How to Tune a Bandura” was a profoundly exasperating experience; how does one represent the level of frustration felt towards a cultural instrument that has so many remembered emotions attached to it? “Saving Sophia” appears as if it was painted with mud, but perhaps that is appropriate. “The Artist Project” was somewhat of an enigma to me. It was a challenge to form the sentiments of isolation into a visual piece, and the subject matter of the painting changed several times. At one point there was a skull in the background which was eventually replaced with an old photograph of a beloved family pet. During the painting of this story, I realized that at its core was my exploration of loneliness and grief, which was a subject matter I had not expected to write about.

When I began this project my thought was that I did not want to simply illustrate a story. It seems though that this is exactly what I have done at times, and I do not know how to change this. I suppose that is why the graphic novel works so well in this regard. There is an allowance for more creativity within some panels of the comic-book format over others, and some panels that can stand on their own as artwork. And perhaps this is the key: it is not possible to represent the whole story in one work of visual art but possible for one critical piece. The thought process behind my project was that there would be two different narrative forms to tell a story—a different perspective from which to view each narrative. Each story, painting or drawing, can stand on its own. Together they bring a different, sometimes more or sometimes less, coherent meaning.

I have explored the edge where past experiences and impressions can be used to examine and create stories based on self. The space between autobiographical truth and fiction, and the space between literary and visual art, are contact zones where explorations of self can be performed. A narrative mode that provides both form and content can be seen as a potential to fill a gap in the genres of self expression. I have attempted to show that the union of a work of autobiographical fiction with a work of visual art created by the writer, through their mutual ability to allow for role play, arguably provide a perspective through which new meanings of self can be explored and shared. There are, however, fewer examples of an author creating a specific visual component to accompany a story, demonstrating room for further exploration in this area.

There is a human need to seek out and better understand one's identity. Telling fictionalized stories based on one's own history is one way to achieve this. Story telling "is an ancient practice, perhaps as old as human history" (Chang 30), and can be seen as having implications not only for the individual, but for contemporary culture as well. As noted by Saunders, "Modern engagements with life-writing are important because they accumulate into a developing and sustained critique of the conditions of self-representation; of the writing of subjectivity. And this critique provides the groundwork for much contemporary theory" (22). Chang also reflects on the potential influence creative life-writing has in academic scholarship, claiming that "imaginative-creative writing style is the boldest departure from traditional academic writing," and although "This approach to writing is subject to criticism for blurring genres of fiction and nonfiction . . . some social science scholars have employed it unapologetically" (148). These stories can be argued to be a type of 'canary in a coal mine' in that there may be more truthful indicators of societal and familial culture reflected in personal identity.

Including visual art as an author's integral component to a story has further value in exploring stories of self. Winterson expands on Eakin's thought that our stories of the past are metaphors for present day lives, and I argue that she claims visual art as a vital piece of storytelling. She states that "Art is large and it enlarges you and me. . . . Through it we see ourselves in metaphor. . . . Art is metaphor. Metaphor is transformation" (66). It could be that this perspective allows for transformation in the understanding of one's identity. Saunders argues that stories of self should be viewed as an alternative art form, stating that "After all, to perceive or consider lives as life works of art is to entertain the idea of lives, and the persons and selves living them, as both creative and created; self transforming, and thus artificial, and generally subject to the same aesthetic principles as works of art, including works of literature" (507).

There is a bridge between literary and visual art. Recognized authors Douglas Coupland and Lisa Moore, for example, are writers who studied in the field of visual art prior to pursuing their literary art form. Research has not, however, resulted in finding examples of either author producing visual art alongside a specific component of their writing. Although I have found pursuit in this area a challenge to my fledgling literary skills as well as to my painterly ones, I intend on exploring this zone of hybridity further, understanding I "will ultimately have to find [my] own style to express [my] interpretation of [my] life and its connectivity to the world" (Chang 149). I have learned more about my identity and the fluid role of memory in the creation of a narrative than expected during this endeavour, and feel that it has produced worthwhile literary and visual stories. There is much room for growth here.

Chapter One: Peeled

They watched as she hacked at the weird looking fruit, spraying bright red juice and curses all over the kitchen. None of them had ever seen one of these things before; the leather-like red skin covering something like a baseball that she said they could eat. It seemed more like a weapon—perfect for throwing at heads. At first their mother had attempted to peel it like an orange, but that only ended with a broken nail. That was when they saw her grab the machete that hung on the wall by the kitchen door to take on the pomegranate head on. She handed each of them a chunk and shooed them outside.

Unsure at first, they quickly launched into peeling off the thin tissue-like skin that was hiding delicate red sacs of an impossibly sweet juice. No wonder the hide was so tough, protecting such a treasure. The three sisters twirled around while they ate, their short cotton sundresses floating upwards exposing tanned skinny legs and bellies. They laughed as the goats swarmed them, grabbing at the fruit. They were used to the goats now and didn't panic like they did the first time they were tackled by them for whatever it was they were eating. They learned that that the goats weren't trying to kill them: just rob them.

Things were so different on the island. This would be the first time the family had Christmas without snow and would decorate a palm tree instead of a pine. The girls didn't go to school with the other children, their mother acting as teacher now. Every morning they worked their way through the lessons brought with them from home. This made them a little jealous of their friends in the neighborhood. Back in Canada everybody had to go to school, but this did not seem to be the way things were done in Dominica. They got over the feeling of being cheated though when they realized their friends were working most days on plantations, getting ready for market, or looking after younger siblings; compared to that school work didn't seem so bad.

They wiped their hands on the tall grass when they finished eating and used the pomegranate rinds to play tug-of-war with the goats. Their mother called from the veranda for them to stop getting juice and goat slobber all over their dresses.

I read in a history book that Dominica was once inhabited by meat-eaters of a certain kind. Christopher Columbus apparently wrote that they were a belligerent and cannibalistic group, terrorizing Spaniards, devouring captives. When he returned to Spain, it's said that Columbus scrunched up a piece of paper and held the crinkled ball out to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle, explaining that this was an exact replica of Dominica's treacherous landscape. It perfectly matched its irritable residents. No wonder the Spaniards abandoned it. Only a people as crazy as the French would try to colonize such a place. Seems appropriate that my family ended up there; given the opportunity, we'd desert each other in a heartbeat.

The sisters shared a bedroom that had three old hospital beds lined up against one wall. The headboards were made of metal bars that had patchwork patterns of white paint and rust. The paint easily chipped off and it regularly flaked onto their pillows and hair as they slept. The room's one window faced an open field across which was the only hospital on the island. This was where their father worked along with other doctors from Canada and England. Because it faced west, the window avoided the early morning sun which allowed the girls to sleep a little longer. At dusk, however, the window became a portal for an unending stream of bats that flew out of a small hole just above it. Between goats stealing their food, insects the size of buses invading the cinder block house, and bats scrambling in the attic directly above them, the girls were quite convinced that the island was full of creatures out to get them.

They had made the mistake of walking across the field after supper once to find their father who was still at work. The bats were on a mission to eat as many insects as possible and they probably couldn't have cared less about the three little humans running below them. The way the girls saw it though, the bats were swooping down at them on purpose to get tangled in their hair. Their father was on his way home, walking across the field towards the screaming trio that was running erratically in different directions. He didn't alter his stride or cower from the bats; he just kept silently walking towards the house. The girls peeled in behind him and used him as a shield.

A Google search pulled up twelve different species of bats on Dominica, most of which are insectivores. Only one species eats other small animals, such as fish or birds: the *Noctilio Leporinus*, more commonly known as the Fisherman Bat, or the Greater Bulldog Bat. Why it has two common names is beyond me. Perhaps the tenacity of this bat made the namers-that-be decide that the bat had more of a bulldog mentality than that of a quiet and reflective fisherman. This bat will dive into the ocean, scoop up a fish in a pouch that is strategically positioned between clawed back legs, and eat it while in flight. It also eats scorpions without any concern of being stabbed by the scorpion's venomous tail. That is one tough bat. They're big too, in terms of typical bat sizes. The wingspan of the Greater Bulldog Bat is close to one meter from tip to tip. It's large and fearless.

The other eleven species of bats also have various sizes of teeth and claws to catch flying beetles or nab ripe fruit off trees. Some are quite tiny (again, by bat standards but not so much by those of little girls). But once you see *Noctilio Leporinus* in action, teeth, claws, and giant leathery wings are all you can see. It's difficult after that to remember the gentle

nature of bats in general. When the bats come pouring out of tiny attic holes at dusk, it's every girl for herself.

They were squished together in the back of the rusty Volkswagen Beetle, their bare legs making squelching noises against the dirty white vinyl seats. The windows were all rolled down, but the breeze that filled the car wasn't cooling anyone.

Three pairs of brown eyes were glued to the back of the man's head. The girls were used to adults in their lives having dark hair like their own, not the tight blond curls that he had. The blond curly-haired man was driving the car, their mother beside him in the passenger's seat. It wasn't clear to the sisters what the blond man and their mother were talking about. The car's engine drowned out their voices as it climbed the steep gravel road. They watched their mother laugh and they strained to hear what the blond man was saying. Being on their own with their mother most of the time was not out of the ordinary; bringing a friend and having him drive, a job they assumed belonged to their father, was.

As soon as the blond man parked the car on the edge of the road the girls tumbled out of the backseat, relieved to be free from the cramped space. When their mother told them that they were going to explore a volcano and hot springs, they imagined pools of warm, clear water. They didn't expect to see pools of bubbling mud. The bubbles hissed when they popped, shooting out steam that reeked of rotten eggs. The girls pulled the tops of their dresses up over their noses, held their breath, and stared at the exploding bubbles. There were no guard rails or walking paths to show where they could safely go, so the girls split off into different directions while their mother and the blond man walked ahead of them.

One of the girls took a look around her as she crouched near a mud pool that had large bubbles forming. She carefully reached out to touch the top of one but couldn't quite make it.

She put her hand down on a rock to lean in closer. The heat from the rock startled her, and she fell backwards as she yanked her blistering hand away. The girl quickly looked up and caught her mother staring at her. There was a second when neither of them moved. Her mother then pulled sunglasses off of the top of her head and slid them onto her face; pursed lips relaxed into a smile as she turned away and started talking with the blond man.

I read in a *National Geographic* once, that Dominica is part of a submerged volcanic mountain range, rising about ten thousand feet from its base to peak. The island is only 300 square miles, so that's a lot of height to cover in a small space. This translates to extraordinary diversity in terms of flora, fauna, and weather systems. It gets anywhere from 70 to 400 inches of rain annually, depending on where you stand. Tiny streams can turn into raging rivers in an instant and landslides happen on a regular basis. Roads rarely stay in a state of drivability. The turbulence caused by the weather and the land that is constantly bubbling upwards, creates a situation of chronic instability. A girl has to watch where she steps and be prepared to grab onto anything that looks remotely dependable to stop sliding downhill.

They had lost track of how many months they had been there, and were surprised when their father told them that the family would be going back to Canada in a few weeks. The contract was done, the hospital was up and running and it was time for them to go. The girls weren't sure exactly how they were supposed to feel about this. They had become attached to their friends and this land that smelled and tasted so different from home. They collected things to remind them of their neighborhood: jagged volcanic rocks, fur plucked from goats,

toy boats they had made from dried pomegranate and passion fruit rinds .They knew it was the right thing to do, but they cried as their mother packed up their dolls to leave behind as gifts for their friends.

It was their last night on the island. The sisters scrubbed off the day's dirt and put on clean dresses. They could hear the bats in the attic crawl space scrambling around, reminding them that it was early evening. Their mother called for them to hurry up . . . they were late enough as it was. The girls quickly slipped on their flip flops, ran through the open front door and crammed themselves into the backseat of the Volkswagen.

Their mother turned in the front passenger's seat to look back at her daughters. "Couldn't you have at least brushed your hair?" she asked, looking up and down each one. She turned forward to look out the front window. She silently gave her husband a brief sideways glance. He looked straight ahead, manoeuvring the Beetle around potholes and rocks, the Volkswagen's engine making clunking and grinding noises every time he had to gear down.

"It's a party. They'll be running around outside anyway." The girls watched their father keep his eyes fixed on the road just ahead of the car's hood. "Nobody will care what they look like."

The car chugged up the steep road and passed through a gate onto a cocoa plantation. The main house looked enormous compared to the cinderblock one the family lived in. Their mother stepped out of the car and breathed in deeply. "You can smell the flowers up here." She looked behind and frowned as she watched her husband refuse to hand over the car keys to the valet, insisting that he would park it himself. Their mother took one of the filled glasses offered to her on a tray and walked towards the picnic area behind the house.

The three sisters followed her to a barbeque pit where a whole pig was being roasted on a spit. The girls watched the pig's massive head revolve in front of them, its mouth open, revealing the rod that skewered it from end to end. Its eyes were closed, charred ears curled forward. It was smiling like it knew something they didn't.

The girls left the roasting pig and ran towards the cocoa trees, weaving their way around them, swatting at the football shaped pods hanging from the trunks. One of the boys who worked on the plantation showed them how to break open a cocoa pod with a machete, exposing a stack of beans that were covered in white, stringy mucus. They watched as the boy popped a bean into his mouth. He sucked on it and then smiled broadly at them, the bean clamped in between his front teeth. The girls followed his lead, and sucked the shockingly sweet slime off each bean. They took turns seeing who could spit them the furthest.

They went to go find their parents. Their father was busy walking around and talking to different people, moving quickly from one group to the next. Their mother was easier to track down. She was sitting on a lawn chair with the other wives who had small children with them. The girls noticed the blond man again, sitting beside her.

By the time the roasted pig was eaten and the musicians came out to play, the garden party was wrapped in darkness. Warm light from the bonfire and kerosene lamps hanging on poles made shadows that played along the main house and plantation trees. The two younger sisters had fallen asleep on the grass beside their mother, but the oldest girl was still awake. She got up unnoticed and worked her way around the adults who were talking loudly and dancing. She noticed a tiny puppy waddling around just on the edge of the lawn and ran over to it. She dropped onto all fours and ran her hands over the round furry body, letting the puppy gnaw on her fingertips.

A man in work clothes walked from the edge of the cocoa tree stand. She didn't notice him at first and was surprised when he spoke. "That's my puppy," he said. "It must have snuck out of the shed. I have more if you want to see them." He wiped the sweat off his head with a dirty handkerchief and stuffed it in his back pocket. He smiled at the girl and she thought his face glowed.

The girl smiled back and nodded. She picked up the puppy that was climbing over her bare legs and followed the man to a small building. He hung the machete that had been attached to his work belt on a hook outside the door. The man held the heavy tarp open for her as she walked into the low, thatch-roofed shed. The man ducked under the stoop and followed, the tarp making a swooshing sound as it closed the doorway behind him. He placed a lit kerosene lamp in the centre of the dirt floor. Against the back wall lay the mother dog with puppies climbing over her body as she panted.

The dog gave the man a low growl as he picked up one of her pups and brought it over to the girl. She sat down on the ground, still holding the first puppy and let the man put the second one on her lap. She laughed as the two pups wrestled with each other and her fingers. The man crouched down beside her.

"They don't have names yet. Maybe you can think of some?" The girl quietly mumbled out different names as she and the man stroked the puppies. He would nod in approval whenever she said one that seemed like it might fit. "You can take one if you like," he said.

The tarp suddenly whipped open, startling the girl. The girl's mother stared at her daughter sitting on the dirt floor. She kept one hand on the tarp, keeping the door open, and took a step inside. The girl could hear her mother's breathing.

"He said we could have a puppy," said the girl to her mother, breaking the silence. She looked back towards the man who stayed in his crouch position, eyes locked on the girl's

mother, his smile disappearing. The girl's own smile slowly faded away. Her mother said nothing as she took a couple of steps into the shed, took her daughter's arm and pulled her abruptly off the floor. The two puppies yelped as they fell hard to the ground. The girl looked back to see the man pick them up. Her mother was moving so fast and could barely keep up as she tripped over her feet. They stopped beside the two sisters still asleep on the grass, and her mother let go of the girl's arm.

"I think I told you," she said, "to stay out of trouble."

The girl sat down on the grass and pulled her knees up towards her chin. "What about the puppy?"

Their mother looked up as the girls' father approached. "Good," she said to him. "It's your turn to watch them." The girl and her father stared the back of her mother's blue dress as she turned and walked away.

In the 70's, foreign countries regularly sent developers to Dominica, supposedly with the intention of teaching Dominicans how to build proper roads, run schools, and provide modern medicine to villages that practiced witchcraft. Officially, Dominica was under British control, or at least that's what the British thought. Radical groups formed alongside more traditional indigenous activists who wanted a new and independent Dominica. The political instability created general strikes and violent attacks on foreigners (in 1974, a Canadian couple was murdered in their home, but this was after we left). Britain finally gave up on its idea of political control in 1978. Refusing to let things develop in any other way than its own, Dominica is a curious and beautiful jewel that's cleverly disguised with a tough pomegranate-like hide.

The bell rang, letting them know that school was done for the day. The girl rammed her homework into her bag and put on her snow boots and coat. She was just on the edge of the school yard when her friend who lived across the street caught her.

“Hey, wait up,” said the friend wrapped in a puffy pink parka. They stopped for minute as the girl’s friend tried to catch her breath. “You’re in a big fat hurry.”

“My mom comes home with the baby today,” said the girl.

“Oh right! Cool.” The two girls made their way across the snowy field, one behind the other, stepping on the narrow snow-packed trail. “Another sister.” They walked until they reached their houses on the other side of the field and stopped in front of the girl’s home. The girl’s friend clapped her mittened hands together and jumped up and down. “Can I see the baby?” she squealed.

The girl shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I don’t know.” She pursed her lips together, rolling them back and forth over her front teeth.

“Come on,” her friend whined.

“No,” the girl finally decided. “I think my mom wants us to meet her first.”

“You’re making that up.” Her friend turned her back and marched across the street, the arms of her puffy winter jacket made angry swishing noises with each stride. She yelled back over her shoulder: “If I get a new puppy or something, you don’t get to see it.”

The girl watched her friend slam the front door. She turned to face her own house, ran up the steps and through the front door. She took off her jacket and kicked off her boots. Her mother was in the living room sitting in a recliner, cradling a baby swaddled in a fuzzy blanket. The girl walked over to her.

“What took you so long?” one of her sisters asked as she popped up from behind the recliner.

“Had to tell my friend that she couldn’t come see the baby yet. I thought we should meet her first.”

Her mother looked away from the baby and frowned as she turned her face to the girl. “That’s silly,” she said after a moment. “Of course she could have come to see the baby. What did you say that for?” The girl didn’t say anything. The mother looked back down at the sleeping infant and smiled as she moved the blanket away from the baby’s face. The girl reached out and gently touched the downy blond curls on her sister’s small, perfectly shaped head.



Fig. 1.

Peeled

Oil on canvas, 10in x 10in, 2015.



Fig. 2.

Feeding Time at Dusk

Oil on canvas, 12in x 9in, 2015.

Chapter Two: Silver Clouds

Anna sat uncomfortably wedged in the backseat of the four-door Oldsmobile with her sister and all their camping gear. Her right calf was cramping up, and with the brace on her lower leg locking her ankle in a flexed position, she couldn't stretch herself out. Father Gregor, an elderly friend of the family, was driving the girls to a national guiding camp in the mountains. Embroiled in divorce negotiations, their parents had asked Father Gregor to get the girls out of town for a few days. He was planning on attending anyway. The camp was being sponsored by Ukrainian-Canadian Catholic churches, and he was the local representative. He agreed to take the girls as a favour to their mother. Anna thought that Father Gregor felt sorry for them, and was trying to make sure that the family didn't all go to hell (weren't all divorced families doomed?). He was, however, providing his own version of hell, refusing to make any "unnecessary" stops. Anna and her sister, Rayna, had been squirming uncomfortably in their seats for the past hour, trying not to pee themselves.

It was completely silent in the car for the majority of the seven-hour drive. Father Gregor apparently thought that "modern music" (the way he said it indicated that it was something truly disgusting) was harmful to the soul. The parish secretary, Mrs. Shepchuk, sat in the passenger's seat up front, trying to fill the silence with musings about the tomatoes in her garden or her three cats. Father Gregor passed the last rest stop about 20 miles back and there hadn't been signs indicating another one would pop up anytime soon. He pulled over on the side of the busy highway.

"Are we stopping here for lunch?" asked Mrs. Shepchuk.

"It's as good a place as any," said Father Gregor. "I don't think anyone will mind if we set up a picnic in that field." He opened his car door and got out.

The two girls looked at each other. Anna silently mouthed the words *I have to pee* to Rayna. Anna slid her right leg out of the car first, and braced herself on the door with her left hand. It felt good to stand; the weight on her leg helped settle the spasm that had started in her right foot and was moving up her calf. The feeling of having to pee became more urgent though. Rayna followed, trying to discreetly hold her crotch and cross her legs at the same time.

“Mrs. Shepchuk,” whispered Rayna, “where are we supposed to go to the bathroom?”

Mrs. Shepchuk looked around the prairie field, the wind whipping her long grey hair into her eyes. She pulled her hair back and held it with one hand, gave Rayna a half smile, and said “I’m sorry dear, but you’re just going to have to find a spot to hide and squat.” She looked around again. “Past that fence post, there looks like some sage brush. You and your sister could go there?” It sounded like a question, but there was no other option.

The girls made their way towards the fence. Rayna held the barbed wire strung between the posts as wide as possible, and Anna stepped through. It seemed like the number of cars whizzing past them increased exponentially as the girls pulled their shorts down and away from the stream of pee as they squatted. Rayna got up first and then helped Anna regain an upright position.

A mild form of cerebral palsy, was what Anna’s mother had told her. A traumatic birth, the umbilical cord wrapped around Anna’s neck cutting off oxygen to her brain for a short period, but long enough that the damage was done. She was lucky though, her mother said. She only had to deal with her brain firing off wonky messages to the muscles on one side of her body, telling them to contract when they didn’t need to. A brace on her right leg helped control that, and her right hand cooperated, most of the time. There wasn’t much Anna could

do about the weight her condition seemed to impose on her mother though. She would have left their father years ago, her mother told her, if it hadn't been for Anna.

"So embarrassing!" said Rayna. "What if somebody we know saw us?"

"There was a rest stop with real toilets back there," said Anna. She tucked her shirt back into her shorts. "Don't worry about anyone seeing us. No one else is going to this stupid camp."

"I can't believe Mom sent us with them," said Rayna, jerking her thumb back towards the car. "Why couldn't we stay at home like everyone else?"

Mrs. Shepchuk caught their attention by waving her sweater and calling them to come grab a sandwich. Anna followed her sister, keeping an eye on the uneven ground for random gopher holes threatening to trip her. They sat on the blanket that had been spread out in the field, and ate their sandwiches, washing them down with water in jam jars. After exactly fifteen minutes, Father Gregor had them gather everything together and they got back in the car.

When they finally arrived at the jamboree later that afternoon, hundreds of tents were already set up. Their camp sites were organized into small clusters. Anna and Rayna were assigned with a group of girls from Ontario. They slung their backpacks onto their shoulders, grabbed opposite ends of the oversized camouflage-green duffel bag that contained their tent, and dragged it to their spot. Anna's left hand cramped as she struggled not to drop the bag. The grip strength of her right was fairly inconsistent, and it jerked in spasms as she strained to keep up her end of the load.

Anna and Rayna looked at the sleek and expensive looking tents their group had set up in a circle with the entrances all facing each other. They were constructed with brightly coloured, ultra light materials. The girls dropped the duffel bag onto the ground. Anna looked

at her second hand backpack and steel-toed army boots tied to a compression strap. This was the gear that their parents had bought for them from an army surplus store. *Fabulous*, thought Anna. *I'm going to stick out even more.*

Rayna kicked the army-issue duffel bag. "Better set up, I guess."

It took over an hour, and required the assistance of two camp leaders to help them raise their red and blue heavy canvas tent that was shaped like a small barn. It was large enough that both girls were able to stand completely upright, have their sleeping bags and packs set up on either side, plus have a clear walkway down the middle.

"Knock knock," said a voice outside the canvas flap. A girl with long brown hair tied up with a pink ribbon walked into the tent. "Wow, what *is* this?" she asked, looking around the space. "You even have a back door."

Anna and Rayna looked at each other, and then back at the girl.

"I'm Jennifer," said the girl. "Where are you guys from?"

"Saskatchewan," said Rayna.

"Explains the baby-barn I guess," said Jennifer. She walked back out of the tent with Anna and Rayna following her. "I'm from Toronto," said Jennifer. She crawled into her tent and came out with her mess kit. "Come on," she said. "It's supper time." The girls got their camp dishes out of their packs and followed Jennifer to the kitchen hall.

Anna defaulted to the hop-skip gait pattern she used whenever she was trying to get somewhere in a hurry, her braced right foot swinging out sideways so she wouldn't catch her toes on the ground. The girls slowed to a walk as they approached the kitchen hall. There were campers lined up, slowly moving towards the long tables that had trays of perogies, cabbage rolls and sausages. Anna clamped her cutlery against her chest with her right arm, held her plate with right hand at a precarious angle, and dished food onto it with her left. A

cabbage roll escaped in the process and landed on the floor, splattering rice onto the running shoe of a girl standing beside her. The girl looked down at her shoe, and then back up at Anna.

“Didn’t know they were letting retards into camp,” she said, her eyes tracing the line up and down between Anna’s leg brace and her clenched right hand. Another girl laughed as Rayna took a step towards her. Anna turned without saying a word, and walked over to one of the long tables where campers were already eating. She set her plate down and sat on the bench.

“What a jerk,” said Rayna as she slid in beside Anna. “Want me to get some more cabbage rolls?”

“I don’t really like them anyway,” said Anna, stuffing a perogie into her mouth.

Jennifer sat down opposite to them, and shuffled the food on her plate with a fork. “Ick,” she said. “Look at all the grease on this.” She began blotting her perogies with napkins. “I don’t eat this kind of stuff back home.” She bit off a small piece of sausage and chewed it slowly while looking across at the two sisters. “I heard what she said.” She speared a perogie with her fork and nibbled on a corner. “Why do you wear that cast-thing on your leg anyway?”

Anna figured that there were three kinds of people in her life: the ones who just stared at her and whispered between themselves, the ones who pretended she was invisible, and the ones who actually looked at her and asked what was up. She looked up from her plate, put down her fork, and took in a breath. “It’s a brace. My right calf just doesn’t work the way it’s supposed to. That’s it.”

“There’s nothing else wrong with her,” added Rayna.

Anna paused for a second, then picked her fork back up and stabbed another perogie.

“That sucks. I sprained my ankle in volleyball last year, and had to wear something like that. Does yours hurt?” asked Jennifer.

The corners of Anna’s mouth turned up slightly. “No, it doesn’t hurt.”

Once supper was finished, the girls lined up to wash their mess kits in the communal sinks. They made their way over to the main campfire set up at the centre of the jamboree, and listened to Father Gregor say the evening prayers and bless the campers. The camp leaders were introduced, and each group met separately to discuss the events planned over the next week.

Anna and Rayna stood with the other girls in their group. There were eight of them in all, one of whom was the girl that Anna’s cabbage roll had landed on at supper. Rayna elbowed Anna in the side and nodded towards the girl. “Great,” sighed Anna.

The girl made eye contact with Anna and then stomped over to the group leader. “I’m not supposed to be in this group,” she said.

“You’re where you’re supposed to be, Natalie,” said their leader as she checked her clipboard. Natalie opened her mouth to say something in reply, but stopped when the leader looked up from her clipboard and waved her pencil at her. “Go sit down with the other girls.”

The group leader adjusted her name tag that had “Theresa” written on it with purple marker, and looked up at the eight campers assembled in front of her. “Tomorrow, we’re going to be prepping for our three day hike in the mountains,” she said, making eye contact with each camper. “Everyone has to carry food and their own gear. You’re going to have partners, so alternate who carries your tent each day.”

Rayna leaned in close to Anna and whispered, “I’ll take all three days.”

Anna frowned. Rayna always stepped in for Anna, defending her, protecting her. To be fair, Anna’s quiet nature and wounded bird persona seemed to foster this, and as far as Anna

could tell, Rayna liked being the one in charge. And Anna had always been comfortable in the role of one who needed protecting. Rayna was younger than Anna, but people always thought that she was the dutiful older sister, looking after her unfortunate younger sibling. Over the years, it seemed to Anna that Rayna was beginning to believe that she was older, stronger, and smarter than her sister. Anna found that instead of feeling safe, she was beginning to feel noticeable and exposed.

“No,” she whispered back to Rayna. “I got it.”

Rayna shrugged. “Whatever. I can carry it when you’re done.”

Theresa explained that because of the size of the jamboree, they would be hiking with two other groups and that it would take two to three days to complete the hike. Other groups would be hiking other trails in the area, but that they would all finish at the same point and the busses would then take them back to the main camp. This meant that they had to try to stay on schedule.

“Not my fault if the gibbled one slows us down,” mumbled Natalie. Anna heard muffled giggles from the girls beside her.

Theresa glared at Natalie, and then scanned the group. “We all have our responsibilities on the hike, to each other and the trail.” She looked down at her clipboard and made a note. “Anna and Rayna,” she said, “we have a lighter tent for you two to pack. That big canvas one you guys brought won’t work.”

Natalie snorted. “Prairie hicks.”

“Shut up, Natalie,” said Jennifer under her breath.

“Okay guys, that’s enough,” Theresa sighed. “Go wash up and head to your tents for lights out. We’re going to have an early morning tomorrow.”

The girls went to their tents and pulled their toothbrushes and towels out of their packs. Jennifer caught up to Rayna and Anna as they walked towards the washroom. "Natalie is such a cow," she said. "I can't stand her."

"Is she from Toronto too?" asked Rayna.

"Yeah, we go to the same church. Her family is really rich, and she thinks she's better than everyone else," said Jennifer. The girls parked themselves in front of unoccupied sinks and brushed their teeth. "She has a dance studio in her house, and a swimming pool in her backyard," said Jennifer after she spat out foamy toothpaste. "She has cool parties. I've never been invited though." She furiously brushed her molars, rinsed her mouth with water and spat again. "My best friend went to one. She said it was awesome."

"She seems kind of mean," said Rayna.

"No kidding," said Jennifer.

The next morning after breakfast, the girls gathered their gear and joined the other campers who would be hiking with them. They made their way to their group leaders who had them load their gear and themselves onto a waiting school bus. It was a couple of hours' drive on a bumpy logging road before they finally reached the trail-head. The girls filed out of the bus and helped each other put on their bulky packs. After checking her clipboard to make sure everyone was present and accounted for, Theresa had the girls follow the second group leader on the single-track trail, while she brought up the rear.

The first part of the trail was twisty, but flat. Anna kept her eyes on the ground in front of her, concentrating on lifting her feet up and over the exposed tree roots and rocks. She had been able to keep up for that part, but gradually fell behind as the trail became steeper and narrower. They took their lunch break at a point where the trail opened up to a look-out area. Most of the girls had finished eating by the time Anna caught up to them.

“Look how she lurches,” whispered Natalie. The other girls giggled. “You know why she’s like that, right?” she said. “My mom says that things happen for a reason. That people get cancer, or AIDS, things like that,” she flicked her wrist in Anna’s direction, “because they did something. Or maybe their parents did.”

“Well, a teacher told me that I would get tuberculosis from leaning up against a radiator in class,” said Jennifer. “I asked my dad, and he said that wasn’t true.”

“Your dad is just a family doctor though. He wouldn’t know,” said Natalie.

They carried on after lunch, the ground levelling out in alpine terrain for the rest of that first day. The hikers took a few more rest stops to let Anna catch up, until they finally reached their first campsite. Rayna and Anna were the last ones in by about thirty minutes, followed by Theresa. The sisters slid the packs off their backs and sat down on them. Theresa went to join the other group leaders. Anna leaned over and slipped her fingers inside her leg brace. The slope of the trail caused an increase in the force going through one side of the brace, and the effort of climbing was triggering strong spasms in her calf. She felt the blister forming over her ankle bone.

Rayna frowned. “I knew you should have stayed at the main camp,” she said.

“And do what?” asked Anna. “They already think I get out of enough stuff with this.” She slapped the top of her shoe and straightened out her leg. “I just don’t know if I can keep going.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Rayna. “Give me some of your stuff, and I’ll carry it.”

“Okay,” Anna sighed. She opened her pack and began rummaging through her gear.

“Here we go,” said Natalie as she walked past. “Knew you couldn’t do it.”

Rayna looked at Anna. “Don’t let her get to you,” she said shrugging her shoulders.

“But she might be right, Anna. You probably can’t do the whole hike.” Anna picked at a

loose thread on her pack. Rayna stood up. "I'm going to go talk to Theresa," she said as she turned and walked off.

"Holy cow I'm tired," said Jennifer as she plopped herself down on the ground. She followed Anna's gaze, and saw Rayna talking with the Theresa. "What's going on?"

"I can't keep up," said Anna. "And my leg hurts."

Jennifer sat up and rubbed her calves. "What're you talking about?" She looked at the rest of the hikers sitting or laying down on the ground. One girl looked like she was about to cry. "We're all tired and sore."

"Yeah. Sure. But it's harder for me," said Anna.

Jennifer sat quietly for a moment. "If you say so," she said finally. She put her hands on her knees and pushed them into extension as she got up into standing. Anna watched her limp away.

Anna knew it was harder for her. *They don't have a clue what it's like!* Anna tried to wiggle her toes in the brace. *They don't know what it's like to wear this stupid thing, or to have to take those muscle relaxants just to walk half decently.* Everything was harder for her. It wasn't her fault and it wasn't fair.

Theresa walked over to Anna and sat down on the ground beside her. "So, I hear you're having some trouble," she said. "Rayna here says you want to go back to the main camp. We could do that if you want. We'd just have to send one of the leaders back with you, which is okay."

"I don't know," said Anna. "Everyone here thinks I can't do it. *I think I can't do it.*"

Theresa put her clipboard down. "Let's take a look at your ankle." Anna pulled off her boot and brace, and took off her sock. The ankle bone was bright red. "There's a blister

forming there, but at least it hasn't broken. I think if we put some extra padding in here, and bandage you up, it'll work out."

"But I can't keep up," said Anna.

Theresa picked up Anna's brace off the ground and turned it over in her hands. She pulled the Velcro straps apart and ran her fingers on the edges. After a minute, she placed the brace gently back on the ground. "You know, Anna," she said. "Things *are* tough for you, and it sucks. But you have a choice, and it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. If you don't challenge yourself, you'll never know for sure what you can or can't do. That's one thing that's the same for all of us."

"But I'm slower than everyone else," said Anna.

"It's not a race, Anna. We're supposed to be having a bit of an adventure here. The bus will wait for us if we take a little longer." Theresa got up off the ground and dusted off the seat of her pants. "But it's up to you. See how you feel in the morning." She picked up her clipboard and tucked it under her arm. "I'm going to go get the first aid kit and see what we can do about your blister."

That night in her sleeping bag, Anna laid awake watching shadows of branches moving across the roof of the tent. She listened to the wind swirling around the trees, and found the swishing sound comforting somehow. She looked across at Rayna who was curled up in a ball, making quiet snoring sounds. Anna crawled out of her sleeping bag, being careful not to wake her sister, and slowly unzipped the tent. It felt like a spotlight was on her as soon as she lifted up the flap; it was the brightest moon Anna had ever seen in her life. And so many stars! She sat down on a rock near the tent, pulled her knees close to her chin and hugged herself.

She was always so nervous about trying new things. So uncoordinated and, although teachers and coaches had tried to involve her in activities at school, nobody really wanted her on their team. Still, she had got up to this point on her own. She was slow, but she carried her own gear, and she had made it.

“There’s always something big holding someone back,” she said quietly to herself. She thought about the times her mother spoke of disappointment, stuck in a life with children she didn’t want. Her father coming home after work, empty rum bottles in the garage, drink always in hand. He didn’t speak of disappointments. He didn’t speak much at all.

She watched clouds made silver by the moonlight drift past. She could smell the sharpness of pine trees in the cold air. It was better than any perfume she knew, and breathed it in deeply. She puffed little clouds of breath out and hugged her knees tighter. The trees in the valley below their camp-site swayed back and forth, as waves of wind moved across them. She was shivering, but didn’t want to go back to her sleeping bag just yet. She focussed on all of it, trying to memorize every detail so that she wouldn’t forget this exact moment. She took in another deep breath and held it.



Fig. 3.

Silver Clouds

Oil on canvas, 12in x 9in, 2016.

Chapter Three: How to Tune a Bandura

Anna bumped her leg, snagging yet another pair of tights and drawing blood in the process. She swore under her breath and turned off the vacuum cleaner to rub her shin. She scowled at the offending string instrument that was propped up against the wall in the corner, and thought that she really needed to get rid of it. She had been guilt-tripped into buying the stupid thing by her mother who, although she had lived almost her entire life in Canada, still considered Ukraine her true home. She couldn't afford it, but Anna put it on her credit card anyway. At the time, Anna felt that it was worth the price if it meant her mother would stop harassing her about keeping up Ukrainian traditions. Now, every time she saw the bandura in her home, she could feel the agitated knot in her stomach gaining in size. It was a sticking point between her and her husband as well: the waste of money, the waste of an unplayed instrument collecting dust. She hated that thing. Dropping the vacuum handle on the floor, she marched off to get an icepack and a band aid.

Band aid on, Anna went back to the living room, sat on the couch and put the icepack on her shin. She stared at the bandura. It had slid down the wall leaving a streak of black paint on her 'Sagebrush Grey' walls. *Fuck*, she thought. She stood up and abruptly grabbed the bandura by its long neck to lift it up. She was startled to feel its weight; she had forgotten how heavy it was. She brought it back to the couch, set the base on the floor and leaned the neck against her thigh as she sat down.

She saw her sixteen-year old self seated on the concert stage with eleven other teenagers, the Ukrainian youth choir behind them and the conductor in front. They were part of a concert planned for visiting dignitaries from Ukraine. The intention was to show the visitors how well the Ukrainians living in the middle of Canada, were able to keep up the culture and traditions of the homeland. They prepared for weeks, knew those pieces inside

out and backwards. Anna's fingertips were blistered and raw after practice sessions, calluses never really getting a chance to establish themselves before being worn off again by the bandura's strings. The audience hushed as the theatre dimmed and the spotlight hit the stage. The bandurists picked up their instruments and positioned them on their laps, fingers on the strings and eyes on the conductor. And then they started to play. It sounded like none of them had any clue of what they were doing. She wasn't sure if their position on the stage affected the acoustics, but they couldn't hear one another. Possibly the banduras hadn't been tuned correctly. Whatever the cause, the result was something that sounded like a chorus of wailing banshees. The conductor threw the baton at them.

Anna shook her head to scatter the memory. *Such a strange thing*, she thought. *A cross between a lute and a harp maybe?* She ran her thumb across the bass strings stretched on the neck of the bandura. A deep reverberating sound filled the room. She plucked at one of the treble strings on the main soundboard, causing a higher pitched note to join the bass that was still humming. She placed the flat of her hands across the strings, and the sound immediately stopped.

Anna got up and rummaged through the bookshelf until she found the beaten up duotang filled with photocopied sheets of music from choir. She opened it on the coffee table in front of her, sat on the couch and positioned the bandura on her lap, the long neck resting against her left shoulder. She looked at the bass notes and tried to find the corresponding string with her left hand, then the correct treble strings with her right. When she plucked chords with both hands, a horrible and discordant noise resulted. She slapped the flat of her hands across the strings to make it stop. *Of course it's out of tune. Thing hasn't been played in decades.*

She found the key to tune the bandura in a plastic zip-lock bag shoved in the back of the kitchen's junk drawer. She placed the bandura on the floor beside the piano and attached the key to the post of one string. She played a note on the piano, and the corresponding one on the bandura, and carefully turned the key trying to get the string to match the piano's sound. The bandura creaked as the key turned one way and then the other. She kept hitting the piano key and turning the tuning key until finally there was a snap and a wire string torpedoed forward. She managed to get her hand in front of her face before the jagged edge of the broken string struck her forearm, drawing blood once again. Anna swore as she inspected her newest bandura injury, and got up to grab another bandage.

She rubbed her forearm as she walked back to the bandura. She stood for a moment, looking at the instrument on the floor. "Fuck it." She picked up the tuning key and threw it back into the junk drawer. The bandura was slid flat underneath the couch, and she carried on with the vacuuming.

The following week, Anna cracked her ankle against the scroll of the bandura that was peeking out from underneath the couch. "Goddamn it!" she said, inspecting the blue welt forming over her ankle. She tried to kick the bandura back under, but some of the broken strings had snagged onto the couch's underbelly and it wouldn't budge. She lay face down on the floor and worked the snagged cloth free from the wires and posts. She pulled the bandura out, and sat back on her heels.

She gently plucked at one string. The single note vibrated within the bandura, and seemed to carry on forever. She plucked a different string, the second sound layering over top of the slowly diminishing first one. She leaned in closer to look at the tiny pieces of coloured wood on the soundboard making up the inlaid flower pattern. "How many hours did it take to make you?" She felt the sharp tips of the broken strings with her finger, and

frowned. “Well,” she said finally, “better replace those strings if it’s ever going to get a chance to be played again.” She got up and started thumbing through the yellow pages in the phone book.

It didn’t take long to get through the few shops that sold and serviced classical instruments. Nobody wanted to take on restringing an instrument they had never heard of before. She tried calling St. George’s—the only Ukrainian Catholic church in town—but the receptionist didn’t have any suggestions, and wasn’t even sure what a bandura was. “I don’t have any more time for this,” she muttered, and placed the bandura back in the corner, bracing it with a pile of books to prevent it from sliding down the wall.

Months later, while on her drive home from work, Anna noticed a small neon sign that flashed “*Amped.*” She always thought that it was a store for electrical supplies, but now noticed the outline of a guitar that was partly lit up on the corner. She signaled right, pulled into the parking lot, and stared at the front of the store. It was impossible to tell what was in there. All the windows were covered with boards that had been painted white. The door had black paper on the inside, so she couldn’t see what was through it. There was a small neon sign at the top of the door that read “Open.” After a minute of quietly sitting in the driver’s seat, Anna turned off the ignition and grabbed her purse.

She opened the door and walked into what seemed like the entrance to a cavern. There were bookshelves on either side of her, crammed with music books and weird knickknacks; a bust of Batman, a giant bottle opener, a multi-colored wicker basket, and incense burners. The narrow bookshelf corridor left her with no alternative but to walk forward and in, or back up and leave. Once through the entrance, she walked into a large room that was, she guessed, twenty feet high. The walls had guitars hung up on almost every square inch. Any free space had t-shirts and posters with various musician/band names pinned to it. A glass

display case along one wall was crammed with guitar strings and picks, comic books, pez dispensers, belt buckles and bongs. It appeared also to serve as a counter, judging by the piles of papers and pens, and several coffee cups on it. There were four narrow windows at the far end of the room up high near the ceiling. It was a sunny day outside, but inside it was a dark world, where any natural light that could penetrate the windows was immediately absorbed by the sheer volume of stuff. She felt like she did when she hid in a packed closet at her grandmother's house as a kid. Her stomach felt rumbling with excitement.

"Hello?" Anna peeked around a few of the bookshelves. She could hear heavy metal music coming from a room at the back. Its door was closed. She went back to the counter and dinged the small bell that had a card with the words "ring for service" taped to it. No response.

She was on her way out when a man came rushing from the back room. "Coming," he said. "Sorry. I get so caught up in stuff back there I sometimes don't hear people come in." He smiled at her.

Anna took a moment to absorb what she saw. She suddenly felt like she had been thrust onto the screen of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and was looking at Riff Raff. The man was shorter than she was, with a slight build. His skin was so white making the veins at his temples look shockingly blue. She hadn't seen anyone so pale before, his black t-shirt making his skin appear even more translucent. He had sparse blond hair that was long, and he wore it loosely around his shoulders. He pulled his hair behind his ears, and looked at her with sleepy brown eyes set above dark circles. Clearly this man hadn't slept or been outside in some time.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his black jeans. He smiled again.

“I don’t know if you can help me or not,” said Anna. She described to him the bandura sitting against her living room wall, and her attempt to tune it. “It’s an odd instrument, and I don’t think it takes guitar strings. Maybe piano? I don’t really know.”

The man smiled broadly, making him look more alert. “That sounds really interesting.” He went behind the counter and moved papers off a laptop. He googled ‘bandura’ and pulled up an image. “Wow. I’ve never seen one of those before.” He looked back at Anna. “I’d love to take a crack at it, if you’re okay bringing it in.”

Anna looked at the man for a few seconds trying to decide what to do. He seemed to be genuinely interested. “Okay,” she said finally. “You’re the first one who is actually willing to at least look at it.”

“Great!” he said as he slapped his hand on the counter. “My name’s Jackson. I’m here pretty much all the time. The other guys don’t keep the same hours.”

“Thanks. I’ll be by in a day or so.” She readjusted her purse over her shoulder, and walked out.

A week later, Anna entered the bat-cave/guitar store with her bandura. There was nowhere to set it, so she propped the base on her foot and held the neck with one hand while she searched the cluttered display case for the ‘ring for service’ bell. She was just about to ding it when she heard the back room door open and brisk steps approaching.

“There you are!” said Jackson. “I thought you changed your mind.”

“Nope. Made it,” said Anna. “It took me longer than I thought to get it into this stupid carrying case. Sorry.” She looked around the room. “Where should I put it?”

“Oh, right.” Jackson quickly piled the papers on the display case onto the guitar amps that sat beside it. “Here. Put it here.” He patted the cleared spot on the counter.

Anna lifted it up and battled with the zipper of the poorly constructed case. It took them ten minutes to extract it. The broken strings and tuning pegs kept getting caught on the cloth inside the canvas bag. Anna lifted up the bandura while Jackson smoothed the canvas out on the counter, and helped her set it down on top. He gently ran his fingers over the inlaid wood pattern.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. He started counting the strings. “Twelve bass strings and forty nine treble. Sixty-one total. Odd number.” He leaned in to get a closer look inside the bandura. “Russian words in there.” He looked up at Anna. “Sorry, Ukrainian.”

“So do you think you can fix it up?”

“These aren’t piano strings.” Jackson plucked an out of key bass note. “No wonder they snapped on you. They’re so brittle. When was the last time it was played?”

“Ah, probably decades. I bought it from a museum shop ages ago, and I guess it had been hanging on the wall there for years.” She found herself suddenly feeling sorry for the bandura, not fulfilling its purpose: a wasted life. She felt guilty thinking of who made it, and of its journey from Ukraine to Canada. “I actually did know how to play one when I was younger.”

Jackson’s head snapped up. “You can play this? You know how?”

“Well no. I can’t remember how. I thought maybe I should try to learn again, so I need new strings.”

Jackson looked down at the instrument, frowning. “Guitar strings won’t work,” he said. “They’re not long enough. I’m going to have to hunt something down.”

“Oh. Okay.” Anna pulled the carrying case forward and started to cram the bandura back in it.

“Do you think you could leave it with me?” asked Jackson. “It would be good if I could use it as reference, you know, to find the right gauge.” He kept running his fingers up and down the long neck of the bandura. “It’ll be safe here. I promise.”

She stopped fighting with the case zipper. Anna felt inexplicably protective. The bandura was a pain in the ass, but it was *her* pain-in-the-ass bandura. Now she didn’t want it out of her sight. *I’m being stupid*, she thought. “That’ll be fine,” she said. “Don’t want to have to cart it home again right now anyway.”

Jackson smiled and rubbed his pale hands together. “I’m really excited about this,” he said. He offered her his hand and then enthusiastically shook Anna’s. His grip was stronger than she had expected. “What’s your name by the way? And I’d better get your phone number.” He hunted around for a pen.

“Anna.” She picked up her purse from the floor and gave the bandura a pat on the neck.

Jackson wrote down Anna’s contact information in a notebook that had obviously had coffee spilled on it regularly, and then mined a tattered business card out of a pile of papers. He wrote a phone number on the back. “The front has the store number, but this is my cell number.” He handed the card to Anna. “I’ll keep you updated, but you can call anytime if you have questions.”

Anna pocketed the card, smiled, and left the store. By the time she got back home, she had forgotten about the bandura.

Two weeks later, she found the duotang with music sheets under a pile of magazines on the coffee table, reminding her that she hadn’t heard from Jackson. She found his card in a coat pocket, and called.

“Jackson here,” said the voice abruptly.

“Oh, hi. It’s Anna. I brought in the bandura a couple of weeks back? Just wondering if you’ve had any luck with the strings.”

“Hey! Yeah, it’s been interesting,” said Jackson. “I’ve got nothing here that’ll work. The strings are a unique gauge, that’s why the sound is so different.”

“Should I just come by and pick it up then?”

“If you’re not in a hurry to get it back, I really want to check out some of my contacts in other cities, see what they’ve got,” said Jackson. His voice picked up speed. “I looked up some YouTube videos,” he said. “Pretty cool that you know how to play this.” He paused to catch his breath. “Sorry I didn’t call you, but I didn’t have anything really to tell you yet.”

Anna paused for a moment. She felt like she had walked up to the edge, and needed to decide if she should jump all in and have this guy continue to work on it. Was she even going to play the bandura again, once it was restrung?

“I guess I never asked you what you charge,” said Anna.

“Oh hey, don’t worry about that right now,” said Jackson. “I’m not going to charge you for finding strings. I think it’s just going to take some time. Just giving a heads up, in case you want it back in a hurry.”

“No,” she said slowly. “No, that’s okay. It’s not like I was playing it before.” She kept flicking the end of the business card with her fingers. “Okay,” she said finally. “See what you can do. I’ll check back later. The bandura’s not in your way over there?”

“Oh no,” said Jackson. “Actually, everyone here is really interested in it. We’ve made space for it. It’s good.”

“Okay. We’ll talk later.” Anna hung up the phone. She examined the front of the business card, flipped it over and looked closely at the handwriting on the back. Jackson’s name was written neatly, the phone number printed out clearly, the last numbers fading as the

pen he used apparently ran out of ink. “Okay then,” she said to herself, and put the card in her wallet.

At first, Anna phoned every two weeks to get an update. This gradually transitioned to once a month. The strings were proving to be difficult. Jackson was able to get a few from New York, a few from a music shop in Florida, a few from Toronto. This completely exasperated both of them – who knew finding bandura strings would be so challenging? Even the city where Anna had purchased her bandura had only one partial set to sell. It took nine months to get all sixty-one strings.

“Now I find out,” Jackson told Anna on the phone, “that I should have just ordered a complete set from Ukraine. I thought it would be easier getting them in North America, but nope.”

“So now what?” asked Anna.

“I’ll start replacing the strings, but not sure how long that’s going to take.”

Anna stopped in at the shop a few days later. There were two men looking at something on the front counter, while Jackson was talking with big hand gestures. Anna quietly stood beside them, and saw her de-strung bandura on the counter with several wire strings draped over it. Jackson looked up and smiled at her.

“Hey, Anna!” he said. “This instrument belongs to this lady here,” he told the others, waving his arm out in her direction.

“This is yours?” asked a tall man with a long grey beard. “Cool.”

“And she knows how to play it,” Jackson went on.

“Well, I used t . . . ,” was all Anna could get out.

“Hey that’s awesome,” said a second man who was sporting massive earlobe stretchers.

How an earth does he get those things in there? Anna thought. She briefly shook her head and re-focussed on Jackson. “How’re things going?” she asked him.

The two men at the counter backed away as she approached, letting Anna get in closer to the bandura. “Hey man,” earlobe guy said to Jackson, “we’ll leave you to it.” The two men nodded at Anna and went to inspect one of the larger guitar amps against a back wall.

“Well, I got the strings off, which was more difficult than I expected.” Jackson turned the bandura so the base of it faced Anna. “The ends get wound around these little hooks that are tucked underneath this ledge.” He took a new string and threaded one end through a tiny hole on the soundboard. “So this has to get wound through this little maze, and then up towards the other end which is also pretty twisty.”

Anna looked closer at the mechanisms. It really was quite a convoluted system. “Didn’t think it would be so difficult,” she said.

“No worries,” said Jackson. “I’m actually having fun learning something new. This is a nice change.”

“You played in a band?”

“Yeah, it kind of wears you down after a while though, and this shop takes up most of my time. It suits me for now. I like seeing what’s going to show up, what problems I get to try to fix.”

“So, no band?”

“No. I just like playing my guitars on my own for the most part, and writing new music. I teach a couple students too.”

Anna nodded. “Sometimes it’s best just to work on something for yourself for a change. I can see that.” She looked back down at the bandura. “I have to tell you,” she said, “I’m getting a little worried about how much all this is going to cost me.”

Jackson wound one of the strings around his fingers. "Yeah, I usually charge \$25/hr." Anna sucked in her breath. "But I've never done anything that has taken this much time."

Anna exhaled. "Yikes. So your total would be . . . ?" She thought of the months that Jackson had been in possession of the bandura.

"Well, if we went by the hours I've spent so far, and I think this is going to take longer to string than I thought it would . . ." Jackson tapped his fingers on the counter. "But I never actually gave you an initial quote, did I?" He grabbed a pencil and scribbled some numbers on a scrap piece of paper. "How about this?" He circled a number and slid the paper to Anna.

She smiled. "Are you sure?"

"Oh yeah, this has been really interesting for me. I'm good."

A month later, Jackson phoned Anna to tell her that the job was done. It had been almost a year since she had left the bandura in his care. She walked into the store and found him behind the counter with the bandura laid flat on top. He didn't notice her approach; he was focussed on tuning one of the treble strings.

"Hi Jackson," said Anna. "I can't believe I'm taking this home."

He looked up and gave her a slight smile. Anna thought he looked preoccupied. "So I've been tuning it," he said. "You should have this little device to help you with that. You clamp it onto the neck like this, and it'll tell you how close you are to the note you're trying to get." He demonstrated tuning one string, going slightly out of tune and correcting the tension as the clamped device indicated.

Jackson then went on to check the other strings. All of them. Anna watched him carefully check the tune of every single string. She followed his instructions as he asked her to demonstrate that she understood what he had just taught her. She smiled as she gently turned the tuning key while watching Jackson as he closely monitored her every movement.

“I’ll give you a discount on the tuner,” he said. “And you can’t just put the bandura on the floor like you’ve been doing. You’re going to damage it.” He pulled out a stand that was behind the counter. “We’ve been using this. You take it. No charge. It really shouldn’t be left on the floor.”

“Oh,” she said, suddenly feeling guilty again about the neglect the bandura had endured. “I’ll pay you for that.”

“No worries,” he said. “It doesn’t actually hold the guitars well anyway.”

He used a cloth to wipe his finger prints off the neck of the bandura. “And don’t use that piece of garbage carrying case. It just pulls at the pegs and strings.”

“Okay,” said Anna. She suddenly realized that she just needed to nod in agreement with everything Jackson said.

“And you know my number, so call if you have any questions. You can bring it in anytime, if you want help tuning it. I don’t mind.” He looked up at Anna. “Have fun playing it again. It sure is a beautiful instrument.”

Jackson lifted the bandura while Anna carried the stand and the tuner to the car. She opened the back door, and spread a blanket on the seat while Jackson waited. He then slid the bandura into the car and closed the door.

“You should come by for a visit sometime,” he said. “Let me know how it’s working out.”

“Thanks for everything, Jackson,” said Anna. “You’ve been great about all of this.”

He nodded at her, and then walked back into the store.

The bandura sat on the stand—un-played—in Anna’s living room for a month after she brought it home. At first she tried to stumble her way through a few of the more simple songs that she once knew, but generally just became frustrated at how much she had forgotten. It

sat in the corner until she cracked her ankle against it while vacuuming one day. She rubbed the welt and started to laugh.

“Okay, I get it.” She pulled Jackson’s business card out of her wallet and called his cell. “Hey, Jackson. I was wondering, do you think you could take on another student?”



Fig. 4.

Nemesis

Oil on canvas, 9in x 12in, 2015.

Chapter Four: Saving Sophia

The coffee shop was packed with a boisterous group of runners dressed in multi-coloured wick-away gear and neon running shoes. They had finished their weekly run over an hour ago, and were all crowded around tables, finishing up their lattes and eating cookies. At least ten conversations were going on at the same time, as they traded stories about life and injuries. Some runners would usually straggle in later, having chosen a longer route in preparation for the fall marathon. But the last small breakaway group was unusually late.

“Hey,” said a woman wearing a fluorescent pink windbreaker, “has anyone seen David and them yet?”

“I thought they came in already, but you’re right . . . they’re not here,” said a man dressed in baggy black running tights. He looked out the window towards the street. “Wow, they’re just coming in now,” he frowned.

Pink Windbreaker and Baggy Running Tights watched the small group of runners sprint in from about a block away, and then slow to a stop in front of the coffee shop. Running Tights’ frown deepened as he watched the two men and one woman stand in front of each other. Finally, one of the men patted the woman on the back, and the three runners went inside.

“Sophia, there you are,” said Windbreaker. “We were getting worried.”

“Hi Sarah,” said Sophia as she dropped down onto a chair.

“You let Dave and Barry drag you out pretty far today,” said Mark, yanking up his tights that had started to migrate down his non-existent hips. “Didn’t Julian start out with you guys? Where’d he end up?”

Sophia looked up at David and Barry.

“We had some trouble,” said David. “Julian’s in the hospital.”

“What!” said Sarah. “What happened?”

The chattering died down, and the runners in the group all looked towards the three late comers. David looked down at his shoes and rubbed his chin. Barry pulled up a couple of chairs, and the two men sat down. Sophia picked at a callous on her hand, and inhaled deeply.

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Sophia remembered the first time she took that leap of faith and decided to try running with the group. She wouldn't have met any of these people otherwise. They all came from different backgrounds; mill workers, teachers, nurses, moms like her. She had met her best friends here. She had been intimidated at first, thinking that they were all freakishly fit, and that she would never be able to keep up. That had been many years ago, and now they had all become so necessary in her life.

That morning, Sophia ended up with David, Barry, and Julian, the four of them wanting to get in a longer run. They had split off from the main pack and gone towards the trails. After so many years of running together, their strides matched each other's, and they quickly fell into their usual pace, picking up where they left last week's conversation off.

“I can't get my snow blower to start up. Going to have to order some new parts.”

“Jesus Dave, that thing's gotta be twenty years old. Just get a new one already,” said Barry. “And why are you worrying about it now. All the leaves aren't off the trees yet.”

“Unlike you Barry, I maintain my equipment and prepare ahead.”

“You're such a boy scout,” Barry saluted David.

“I just get the neighbour to snow plow my driveway when there's too much to shovel,” said Sophia.

The men laughed. "You could get your neighbour to do anything for you, Sophia." Barry elbowed her in the side, pushing her off the path. "I'll plow your driveway for you. And any other special chores you might have." He laughed again, and winked at her.

Sophia caught back up to Barry and smacked him on the back of his head. "God Barry, knock it off." She smiled, remembering the time when she felt completely creeped out by Barry. He was so over the top with his smarminess that most women were instantly repulsed. It wasn't until after a couple of months of running with the group that she realized Barry was harmless. He hit on all women; all ages, married or single, testing the waters to see who would bite. Once he figured out she wasn't interested in anything other than friendship, he stopped. Sophia couldn't think of anyone who actually responded to Barry's moves the way he seemed to want.

"You're quiet today, Julian," said David. "How've you been?"

"Not bad. I haven't been feeling . . . all that great . . . though." Julian got in a couple of breaths, pumping his arms. "Mary's . . . blocking attempts . . . to go . . . for runs." He spoke a few words at a time, trying to breathe in between.

"That's why I'm not married anymore," said Barry. "Too many restrictions."

David rolled his eyes at Sophia. "Well, good that you're getting back into it now," he said.

"Yeah," puffed Julian, "have to run. Keeps me sane."

"You're sane?" laughed David.

They followed the sidewalk along the busy street, towards the trail that would take them away from traffic and into the quiet of the forested river bank. Sophia loved that route. The switch from the chaos of the city street to the stillness of the trail calmed her mind. Running had a way quieting everything down when life got too crazy.

“Are you and Mary taking any vacations this year?” asked Sophia. She had slowed down to match Julian’s pace, and watched David and Barry slowly pull away.

Julian didn’t answer right away. He was breathing fast, blowing out hard through puffed cheeks. “Yup.” He pumped his arms and legs, staring straight ahead. “Hawaii.”

“That’s great! We went to Maui with the kids a couple of years ago and . . .” Sophia turned to look at Julian, but he wasn’t there. She looked back and saw him slowing down to a walk. She yelled at David and Barry to hold up.

“You guys just go on,” said Julian, waving Sophia off as she walked towards him. He had stopped and was bent over, both hands on his knees supporting his weight. “I haven’t run in a few weeks . . . so out of shape . . .”

Sophia didn’t like the way Julian looked. He was kind of a pale guy anyway, but he seemed really white to her now. David and Barry pulled up beside them.

“Really,” puffed Julian. “You guys just go. I think I’m going to walk back.”

“You sure?” asked David.

“Yup. Don’t change your run for me.”

“See what happens when you listen to your wife,” laughed Barry. “You get out of the routine.” He turned and started to run back towards the trail. “We’ll see you at the coffee shop.”

Sophia frowned. “You’re sure?” she asked Julian.

Julian just waved at Sophia and turned. She watched him for a few seconds, and then caught up with David and Barry.

“I don’t feel good about leaving him.”

“Jesus, Sophia,” said David.

Sophia looked back and saw Julian standing on the sidewalk. “Nope. I’m going back.” David and Barry groaned, but turned and followed her.

“Hey, Julian. My hamstring is kind of bugging me anyway. I think I’ll walk back too,” said Sophia as she put her hand on his shoulder.

Julian didn’t answer. He looked at Sophia with wide eyes. *He’s so pale*, she thought. His mouth was moving; looked like he was trying to make a sound, but nothing was coming out.

Julian’s knees bent, and he sat down hard on the curb. Sophia quickly sat beside him, her hand on his arm. She could feel her heart’s pace quickening; each beat felt like it was inside her head. Her mouth was suddenly dry. Julian’s breathing was so loud.

“Hey, I’m just going to take your pulse here.” She picked up his hand. It was cold and damp. She remembered not to use her thumb to find the pulse, and started counting. Julian’s body suddenly went rigid. His neck arched and his eyes rolled back.

“Here we go.” Sophia steadied herself for what she figured was coming next. She caught Julian’s head and guided him down to sidewalk. His arms and legs made jerking motions. His mouth opened and closed like a hooked fish on a dock. His whole body contracted, and then it suddenly stopped. No motion at all. David and Barry stood over Sophia. She looked up at them, waiting for someone to say something. In a second she realized that they had no clue what to do.

“Barry. Go to that gas station and call 911. Tell them we’re at 5th and Temperance, and that a man is having a seizure. No, a heart attack.”

Barry didn’t move. He stared at Sophia. “Really? You’re sure?”

“Barry! Now! Call 911. Come back and tell me they’re coming!” She put her cheek against Julian’s face and waited for the hint of a breath while she watched Barry sprint to the gas station down the block.

“He’s not breathing.” She sat back on her heels, pulling threads of CPR courses out of her memory banks. She looked at David. “We have to do this.”

David got down on his knees opposite Sophia, Julian’s body between them. Sophia lifted Julian’s chin with one hand under his neck, pinched his nose with the other and blew air into his lungs. She watched his chest fall, and sat up to start chest compressions. “One and two and three and four and five . . .” She counted off to thirty.

“Push harder,” said David. “I can’t feel a pulse.” He repositioned his fingers flat on the side of Julian’s neck.

Two breaths. Sophia’s shaking fingers felt along Julian’s rib cage finding the sternum, and placed the heel of her hand in the centre. She inhaled deeply and leaned in hard. “One and two and three and . . .” This time she could hear a huffing sound coming from Julian’s mouth every time she pushed. His rib cage pushed back against her with each compression. She could feel the ligaments in Julian’s chest wall straining against the downward force. She cringed, waiting for a tearing sound. Or worse.

Breath. Compressions. Breath.

“Good,” said David. “Keep going.”

She didn’t know how many cycles she went through, but finally, there was a response. A shallow breath. A weak pulse. They rolled Julian onto his side. Sophia crouched low on the concrete at Julian’s face, watched him breathe, took his pulse. His eyelids started to flutter.

“Hey, Julian. Everything’s going to be okay.” She wasn’t sure if he could even hear her, but she kept talking.

“Ambulance on its way,” Barry gasped. He was holding a bottle of coke. “Here. They gave me this. Thought caffeine might help.” He shrugged, and when no one accepted the offered bottle, Barry opened it and took a swig.

Julian’s eyes opened and latched onto Sophia’s. His blue lips were moving, but he was making no sound. Sophia used the bottom of her shirt to wipe the spittle that was draining out of his mouth. “There you are,” she whispered.

Julian tried to sit up. He weakly swatted at David and Barry’s arms as they settled him back down. He would not break eye contact with Sophia, and kept moving his lips.

She gently pried his fingers off her shirt, and adjusted her position so that Julian’s head was on her lap. It was starting to rain, so she took off her running jacket and held it over his head like a tent.

“Good one, Jules!” Barry laughed nervously. “I think I’ll collapse, so I can lay there with my head on Sophia’s lap!”

An explosive laugh escaped from David. “Jesus, Barry. You never miss a chance.”

They could hear sirens getting louder. Julian gave a faint smile, and this time, Sophia could just make out what he was trying to say. “Don’t . . . tell my wife.” His voice was getting a little stronger. “She’s gonna . . . kill me.”

Sophia laughed, the tension she had been bracing inside giving way. “I won’t say a word,” she said, wiping rain-drops off his face with her hand.

The ambulance pulled up and two paramedics leapt out. Seconds later, Julian was on a stretcher, IV in place, monitors on, and loaded into the back of the ambulance. One of the paramedics questioned them briefly, and then they took off. The three remaining runners

stood in the rain watching the ambulance disappear, listening to the fading sirens. The sudden silence shocked them. David put his arm around Sophia's shoulders. "He'll be fine," he said.

Sophia stepped towards the sidewalk and picked up her rain-soaked jacket from the ground. A sudden physical exhaustion hit; her heart was beating fast and hard. She could taste blood in her mouth. She watched her hands shake as she tried to navigate their way into the sleeves. Wrapping her arms around herself, she started to walk back in the direction of the coffee shop.

"Hey, where you going?" asked Barry.

"Yeah," said David. "We're heading this way, remember?"

Sophia stopped and turned to look back. The two men were facing the direction of the trail, legs in mid stride. "You're kidding, right?" *How can they possibly want to go on?*

"Guys, I'm done. I don't think I can run anywhere."

"We can't do anything from here," said David. "Julian would not be happy, if he knew we ended up changing our run for him after all." He and Barry started running backwards, facing her and gesturing with their arms. "Come on."

"Really?" Sophia put her hands on her hips and stared at them. After a moment, she smiled, put her head down and started a slow jog forward. They continued on slowly, gradually picking up speed. They ran together hard along the river bank, breathing in the fall air; wet leaves squelching under their feet. They hurdled over logs, sprinted along open stretches, not needing to say a word.



Fig. 5.

Untitled (study for Saving Sophia)

Oil on canvas, 12in x 9in. 2016.



Fig. 6.

Saving Sophia

Oil on canvas, 12in x 9in. 2016

Chapter Five: The Artist Project

Dear Q,

It's been thirteen days and eighteen hours. This motel room which at first freaked me out is actually a safe place. I can hide here from all the wacky artist types and repair the damage done to my bubble after being subjected to twelve hours of exposure to them. Today has been particularly difficult. I was this close to clocking more than one pretentious asshole (and yes, I realize that this is my own perception—it is quite possible that these pretentious ones are actually brilliant, although I'm thinking this is unlikely). We have a break now, thank god. I am not looking forward to this evening. I can't believe that I don't have much scotch left.

Why I initially thought it would be a good idea sign up for this artist's retreat is beyond me. A remote island completely inhabited by artists. *A total immersion into all things art would push creativity*; that's what Mark said. *We'll be fine; you should do this. It's not like the kids aren't old enough to survive without you for a few weeks.* He figured it would be like going to a French immersion camp—sink or swim kind of situation. Sounded logical, but it hasn't really turned out like I thought it would. I was supposed to finally feel like I found my people or something like that. Instead, it's as if I travelled through a wormhole to another dimension where I'm even more out of place than usual. The fact that you have to take a ferry to get here which doesn't run unless the weather is perfect, pretty much ensures that there's no turning back. The village is what I expected though: small Easter-egg coloured wooden buildings with peaked roofs. The people even look how I imagined they would, with lots of long hair in braids, dreads, beards, Birkenstocks, colourful and gauzy clothes. Don't get me wrong. I have been known to wear socks with my Birkies. Have to say that I still feel like a complete alien here though. I have this penchant for being hermit-like; I'm happiest

when I'm alone in the studio with my paints and canvases, especially when you were there. You never said anything, but would give me a look that always made me laugh when I'd start ranting about something that wasn't working out. But here painting isn't enough. I'm surprised at just how lonely I've been. I phoned home the first couple of nights which just seemed to make things worse.

I wish you could have seen me trying to bust into my room after I checked in. You would have thought it was amusing. I required the assistance of a lesbian couple travelling from Germany. They had been watching me fight with the lock while they sat on white plastic lawn chairs set up in front of their motel room, drinking Canadian beers. They explained with many elaborate hand gestures that the key needed to be turned in a certain way while jiggling the doorknob just-so and pulling forward ever so slightly. Their door apparently required the same technique.

My room has two double beds, for those times when I get the urge to trampoline back and forth. They have these psychedelic, amoeba-like patterned bedspreads. Everything's clean though. Seems they had just finished painting the wood panel walls white before I arrived, and put in newish fuchsia indoor/outdoor carpet. The paint and glue fumes add to the 1960's psychedelic feel. There's a kitchen table in the corner with a colourful flower print Formica top, a small coffee maker, and two black mugs. The table has two old office chairs, their seats covered with oddly stained and frayed black fabric, shoved underneath. This is where I've set up my laptop and do my writing, sketches of new ideas. There's a small fridge that can accommodate a few things like four apples, six beers and a bottle of wine. The beer and wine didn't make it to day two.

That ridiculous first day was less than optimal. There was the initial meet-and-greet reception in the morning followed by the free for all scramble as people jockeyed for

position. Studio spaces were not assigned and there was a frantic race as people grabbed their supplies to stake out their territory. I managed to secure a corner spot in one of the classrooms facing east—you know how much I like the early morning light. Then there was a lot of re-staking of territory. I didn't know anybody, but apparently everyone here knows everyone else, and there are some people that others wanted to be working beside. No one was setting up beside me, until finally this one girl named Leah showed up. She looked like a foundling that had just wandered out of the forest; untied hiking boots with long wool socks, dirt on her face, her long hair piled into a messy bun. I swear there were some sticks in there. She usually smells a little off (pot, campfire, old sweat), but she's the nicest person I've met here. I feel comfortable around her even though she's so much younger than me.

Once everyone was set up we were called to the main lecture area for the fricken artist's talks. In the welcome package they sent was the notice that an introductory talk about our 'artistic process' was expected. I put together a slide show, practiced my speech at home in front of the mirror for days before I even got here. I was supposed to sound casual, off the cuff, like I did this sort of thing all the time. No big deal. Remember when I told you about the time I had to slip out after giving a talk at work to go puke in the bathroom? Did not want a repeat performance. I figured I would volunteer about half way through the presentations, give myself time to prep with deep breathing techniques. Best laid plans.

One of the instructors pointed right at me and said, "Sophia, you're up." It caught me off guard. I wasn't even sitting anywhere near the front, and what happened to asking for volunteers? It took me five tries to get that stupid thumb drive thing into the projector. My hands were shaking so much.

"This is some of my early work," is what I was trying to say, but at mach 10 it sounded more like one really weird word. I couldn't catch my breath and my heart was apparently

trying to jump up my throat. I fast forwarded through more images. The shaking in my hands had at this point moved to include my entire body and, very obviously, my voice. I tried to explain that the images were of paintings of the northern region I'm from as I kept firing through them.

"Whoa!" said one of the instructors. "Can you back up there? We'd actually like to see them." I tried to take a deep breath and back track. "Tell us what's going on here," said another instructor. It was an image of the preliminary stage of one painting.

"I wanted to try something different," I said at a slightly slower but still shaky speed. All of a sudden my gut did a flip. "Sorry," I said, "I'm really nervous." I had to double over and hug my stomach. Still folded in half, I shot one finger up into the air and asked for a second. After about ten or so, I stood up and tried to keep going. I managed to stutter, "I wanted to go a little looser with this one." I was furious with myself, could feel that familiar rage rearing up. Why does this have to happen every single fucking time? I know what I want to say, what I should say, but I just can't do it. The shaking got worse and I was beginning to look like I had just taken a shower with my clothes on. My glasses kept sliding off my face.

"It's okay," said the first instructor. "Nobody's judging. We're all here to help each other." I managed a quick look at the class. Some people were looking at the floor; some were fiddling with threads on their clothes. A woman—the one I've noticed who always has a single section of curly hair purposefully pulled out of her pony tail and positioned on the same spot on her forehead every, single, day—she was looking right at me and nodding her head like I had been saying something truly inspirational. Nobody was looking at the images of my work. I felt so fucking useless.

Ten minutes of hell. I had to double over one more time to try to rein in my gut. The shaking never stopped; a perfect impersonation of an addict going through withdrawal. When

I finally finished, I yanked out my thumb drive and slunk back to my seat. I could feel the heat blasting off my face and just wanted to run screaming from the room. Thank god the lights were dimmed at least. I didn't really hear anything anyone else said after that, but I was conscious of the discussion going on with the other presentations; genuine interest in the work of everyone else. No one had asked me anything. I had to distract and try to calm myself during the rest of the presentations by counting the ceiling tiles.

During the last presentation, the woman with the crazy curl sat down on the chair beside me. She leaned in, the curl plastered on her forehead staying put, and whispered, "Try not to be too hard on yourself. We're all nervous. If nothing else, you made everyone else feel better about what they were going to say." She smiled at me, patted my knee, then got up to move back to her seat. You wouldn't know this of course, but there are 105 ceiling tiles in that room, and they all have small decorative holes in them.

The small fridge had run out of beer and wine by the end of that day. I was so happy when I found the legion a few days later and was able to buy off-sale. They only sell crappy beer and this cheap whiskey that I'm currently drinking, but it has helped me get through the past few weeks.

Have to run. I'm already late for the gallery reception. I'll finish this letter when I get back.

The gallery was packed, which was both great and terrible. I didn't know there were that many people around here—not sure where they all hide during the day. The instructors had picked out what they figured was the best work done by each artist during their time here, and installed it in the gallery space. The public was invited, and the artists were expected to speak. Perfect set up for me, right?

I guess another one of the bad things about not being to talk that much to people is that hardly anyone here has a clue who I am, despite the fact that I've been working beside them over the past two weeks. "Who is this Sophia person?" one woman asked me when she was making up labels earlier today to put up beside the paintings. I kept telling her that it was me; I was the artist who painted that piece, but she still seemed confused. She eventually relinquished the label and kept looking at me without saying anything, so I very maturely snorted and walked away. It's frustrating. I've been trying, really I have. I've made a conscious effort to go up to artists multiple times while they worked on their drawings, paintings, sculptures, whatever. I listened to this woman talk about her giant scribble drawings (no, I don't really understand what they were about, but they were fricken huge, which is apparently a big deal—no pun intended), and asked questions. I was actually interested, and she seemed to enjoy talking. She has not once looked at my work, or asked me any questions, so of course she wouldn't know who I am I guess. She's about the same age as me, has dark brown hair with one inch of grey roots, Buddy Holly glasses, thighs that look like she rides horses a lot (no, I don't know if she actually rides horses or not; yes, I know I'm being judgemental). She seeks out the younger artists in the building. They, apparently, are the ones who have something interesting to say.

There was one installation that people seemed to talk a lot about; belonged to Agnes, aka Weird Pornography Girl. She did this bizarre video installation that I cannot figure out. It had a lot of swirling colours and a recording of what sounded like something metal hitting something else metal overlaid on top of a recording of somebody saying something indecipherable. Agnes uses porn magazines as references for her drawings of people doing unspeakable things to each other in steam baths or locker rooms. Tonight though, this thing shows up. She apparently just did it this afternoon. Royally pisses me off. We've been

busting our asses to get projects done over the past few weeks, and Agnes throws this together in a few hours and everyone loves it. Why? Because it's a fucking video installation. It's digital, therefore it exists. Nothing else is relevant. Painting doesn't matter. Not edgy enough. What the hell is wrong with finding beauty in the most unlikely places?

To be fair, I suppose I have to admit that I think some of Agnes's drawings are beautiful, despite the graphic and violent content; an unlikely place for beauty if ever there was one. Touché, I suppose. Still, I'm struggling with the whole video thing.

Failing to find much in the way of redeeming qualities in Weirder-than-Agnes-Buddhist-Guy. Eric's thing is that he grinds his own paint from found rocks, and uses water from mountain streams as his medium. A noble process I suppose. He meditates in front of his studio space each morning for thirty minutes before starting anything. He's the guy who told me that I paint realism because I'm incapable of painting abstractions. I tried to show him some of the abstract work that I have in fact done, but he wasn't interested.

While doing a walk-around to see everyone's work in the gallery, Leah (the nice forest dwelling girl) and I stopped in front of Eric's water colour painting. Admittedly, the colours were fairly spectacular. Eric asked us how we were enjoying the show thus far, and then proceeded to tell us that his colours were so pure and original because he ground new paints for each work. He was rolling a small grey stone in his hand while he was talking, and then suddenly spat on it. He smeared the spit on the rock with his fingers, and then placed the very wet stone that was now bright blue in my palm. He explained how the blue comes out with moisture, and that it was infinitely better than the terrible blues I get in my tubes of paint. He then closed my fingers around the stone with both of his hands, smiled and said that I could keep the rock as a gift; to remember him and the truth of colour. I was this close to punching

him in the face. You probably would have preferred if I'd bit him. Luckily, Leah started to laugh and she led me away. No assault charges today.

We did have to talk about our projects, but I didn't have to go first this time. The instructors spoke to the audience about the artists and the importance of this residency program, and then briefly about their own work that was on display. Everyone else spoke in the order of the installed artwork in the gallery. Okay, I admit that I had another glass of wine, but Leah got it for me, so how could I refuse? I could feel my nerves starting to rev up, and it helped a little with that. As expected, there were those who went over in great detail, the minutiae of every single thought process that brought them to their final product. Others used brevity and humour, which was a godsend. As irritated as I've been about some of the attitudes here, I have to say that everyone seemed genuinely grateful to be able to show their work and speak to an audience that had an idea of what they were trying to do. Almost everyone said something about their struggles in creating art, and that being in the presence of rest of us really pushed their boundaries in the way they worked. That was surprising to me. I thought they were all doing what they typically do, and some of them were generally just showing off, but usually they were trying to approach things a little differently. Some people just weren't comfortable pushing too far. I thought I was the only one that was so scared, although my fear seemed like it was at level 11, relatively speaking.

Maybe it was the wine/whiskey combo, or the sudden realization that we all have our things that we're working against, but my talk wasn't so bad this time around. I made it shorter, and avoided answering questions at first. But then, someone asked me a great question—it was Eric of all people!—and I found that I was suddenly okay with talking about my work, almost enjoyed it even. Leah told me that I sounded professional, and that I had made my paintings suddenly seem more interesting somehow; I had given them

something new to consider. She said that I could believe her, because she wasn't even stoned yet. I could have kissed her right there.

I'm back in my motel room now, finishing this letter. I didn't really feel like heading to the pub with everyone else, although I have to say I am very happy that they asked me. Maybe I'll go back later. I just really wanted to finish writing to you. Also, I'm terrible at remembering, and I wanted to make a list of some things before they fall out of my head. If I could just tell them to you, I would probably be able to remember better.

I miss you. You have no idea how much. Despite all my judgemental weirdness, neuroses and possible addiction issues, you still seemed to love me. Or your version of that anyway. I really wish you were here.

Sophia



Fig. 7.

The Artist Project

Oil on canvas, 12in x 12in. 2016.

Chapter Six: Feeding Birds

It was supposed to be like she remembered it at her grandparents' home. They had nailed a board to their kitchen window sill to put vegetable scraps and stale bread out for the birds. She remembered being five or six, sitting by that window and watching the birds bounce around on the board feeder, eating everything laid out for them. The birds weren't even nervous about her being on the other side, so accustomed were they to the humans that kept food piled high all year.

She left the prairies with her husband once they were married, and lived in a small city in central British Columbia. Despite now having their own home, her vision of feeding birds as her grandparents did was not going according to plan. She decided against pounding nails into window sills, settling instead on nailing tin pie plates on top of deck railings. Unfortunately, she found with this scenario that although the birds were enthusiastically eating everything, they would then promptly poop all over her new deck furniture. This took something away from the atmosphere as she sipped a glass of chilled pinot gris while reclining on a cushioned chaise-lounge, trying to identify northern songbirds.

Their house was tucked in the end of a small neighborhood and had green space with towering spruce and fir trees surrounding it. They built a fence around the property a few years ago, not so much for privacy from neighbours whose yards they couldn't see anyway, but to keep the deer from eating the small cedars they planted in the garden. She moved the pie plates a safe distance from the deck to the top of the fence posts. It was then that she found it necessary to constantly be on guard duty. The advantage to this set up was that she was developing surprising marksmanship skills. Parked in her chaise-lounge, binoculars hanging around her neck and newly purchased slingshot at her side, she could grab a ball bearing from the bowl on her wicker side table and stun a thieving crow in three seconds flat.

Having to be on constant high alert was exhausting though, and unfortunately she also made the chickadees and sparrows nervous about approaching the pie plates.

She bought a wooden bird feeder shaped like a grain elevator at the farmer's market. The rough pine walls that were painted red had the words 'Saskatchewan Pool' stenciled on the side. This reminded her of her grandparents, and she felt it might help in her quest to sustain northern songbirds. The roof of the elevator flipped back on small brass hinges and allowed for an entire bag of bird-seed to be dumped in, gradually spilling out of the two feeding trays at its base. *Perfect*, she thought. *Crows can't get all the seed*. She rolled a large stump from the woodpile in the yard to the centre of the lawn and set the grain elevator on top.

It didn't look right; the old stump with the homemade grain elevator, which she initially thought was cute, now looked like junkyard material and out of place next to her new patio furniture. She felt a familiar anxiety surface as she stared at the bird feeder. She thought about the time she baked a cake for her grandparents when she was about twelve. They had come over for coffee one evening to play bridge with her parents and she wanted to bake something special for them. Her mother brought the cake into the dining room while she stayed in the kitchen to clean up. She remembered how the light at dusk reflected off the water in the birdbath they had in the backyard. This attracted her attention to the kitchen window and she watched the birds take turns bathing. She quietly went outside to scatter leftover graham crumbs and pieces of chopped pecans on the ground, and remembered feeling calm and happy as she watched the sparrows flock to the offering. Once the crumbs were gone, she went back inside and found her mother scraping whole pieces of cake off dessert plates into the garbage. "They didn't like it," was all she said before returning to the dining room.

Although the grain elevator was successful in limiting the crows' ability to eat all the feed, there were other threats. She watched the squirrel speed along the top of the fence, pause, and then freeze after it jumped down to the lawn. Apparently deciding that it was safe, the squirrel sprinted to the stump and crawled inside the grain elevator through the feeding tray. She was amused at first watching the squirrel sit with its back protected by the grain elevator wall, eating seeds while watching its surroundings. This turned to rage when she witnessed the squirrel run around the grain elevator as small yellow warblers approached, chasing them away and then securing itself back inside. *Bugger*, she thought. Between the squirrel and the neighbour's bird-hunting cat, she was constantly diving for her slingshot.

She moved the grain elevator to the top of the trellis wall her husband had made for her. When he was building it she had thought the posts were huge, looking like they were meant to hold up something monumental in weight as opposed to the delicate creeping vines she intended to plant one day. She reasoned that sometimes things happen for a reason and decided that the posts were actually meant for the grain elevator. The cat and squirrel would now have to run across the length of the yard and dodge their crazy border collie before getting a crack at the birds or the seeds.

The cat gave up, but the squirrel was wily. It revised its route, which still involved running along the top of the fence while her dog ran a parallel course barking his head off. Instead of immediately leaping down to the lawn, the squirrel now scrambled up to the tree fort her husband had built for their children. From there it jumped to the roof of the shed, hopped to the trellis post and then tucked itself back in grain elevator. To add insult to injury, the squirrel would pelt her border collie with sunflower seeds while the dog made valiant attempts to jump the vertical ten feet to the top of the post. *The squirrel is doing that on purpose*, she thought. She pulled the slingshot out of her back pocket.

Early one morning while having the first sips of coffee, she looked out the kitchen window and saw that the grain elevator was on the ground. *Should have nailed it to the post*, she muttered to herself. She put down her coffee, pulled on a pair of sweat pants and tucked her nightgown into the waistband making her look like she was wearing a grey lumpy inner tube, and went outside. Strong winds whipped hair into her eyes and nearly pushed her over. She decided that the wind had hurled the birdfeeder to the ground, and scolded herself for not securing it properly. The knot in her chest tightened, and she could hear that remembered voice telling her “What did you do now? If you’re not going to do it right, why bother?” Luckily, there was little damage to the grain elevator, but the seed was all gone.

She went to the shed to get a ladder. She hauled the grain elevator up and secured it to the trellis by wrapping bungee cords repeatedly around the feeder in figure eights. The wind continued to lash around her, threatening to knock her off the ladder. She hung onto the post with one hand and smacked the grain elevator a few times with the other to test it. Satisfied that it wasn’t going anywhere, she made repeated trips up and down the ladder with scoops of birdseed.

Early the next morning, she saw a flash of movement out the kitchen window and instinctively reached for the slingshot. Once she got to the patio door though, she realized that it wasn’t going to be enough. A mother black bear was at the top of the trellis, her back legs wrapped around the post while her front paws swatted at the grain elevator. Two cubs were sitting at the base of the post, looking up at their mother. The post shook with each hit the grain elevator took. The feeder eventually was knocked off but strung up by the bungee cords, it flipped upside down and emptied the entire load of seed. The mother bear scooted down the post and joined her cubs, the three of them sitting on the ground shovelling birdseed into their mouths.

“Hey!” she said as she grabbed her jacket. “That’s not for you!”

Her husband ran onto the deck before her, and was snapping pictures of the bears with his cell phone.

“Are you crazy?” she said. “Get back from there!”

Her husband ignored her and kept walking slowly towards the bears, taking photos and videos. The mother bear stopped eating and watched him while her cubs continued to scarf down anything left of the birdseed. The mother bear stood up and stepped forward.

“Get your ass back up here!” she hollered at her husband.

“Better give up on feeding the birds for a while,” said her husband once they were back in the kitchen. They watched through the window as the bears slowly ambled along, climbed the eight-foot fence like it was nothing, and then disappeared into the trees. “You can put the feeder out later, once the bears aren’t out scrounging so much.”

The new bird feeder she had ordered online arrived at her doorstep mid July. *Should be safe to get this out now*, she thought. The “Squirrel Buster” was guaranteed to thwart squirrels and large birds with its ‘weight sensitive seed distribution system.’ Any animal tampering with the feeder that was heavier than a robin would set off a spring, which would promptly shut the seed dispensing unit. The box didn’t say anything about busting bears, but she figured that the complicated cylinder might be enough of a deterrent. She hung up the feeder onto an extended hook attached to the trellis post.

Two glorious weeks of uninterrupted bird feeding ensued. She was entertained by the squirrel’s attempts to extract birdseed, and laughed at the crows that loudly squawked in frustration at the feeder. Sparrows and finches perched on the trellis, ate at the bird feeder, and flitted around the yard as if they owned it. She put away the slingshot. Then one morning, they were back; the two cubs had ventured out on their own for food. One of the

cubs had climbed up the trellis post and was swatting at the “Squirrel Buster,” while the other watched from the base. She knocked loudly on the kitchen window and ran to the deck.

“Hey!” she yelled, clapping her hands. She stomped her feet on the deck and moved towards the cubs. One had managed to get the cylindrical feeder in its mouth, and ripped the hook out of the post. The bears ran to the fence, knocking over patio furniture along the way. The cub dropped the cylinder as it launched itself up and over, following its sibling. She picked up the feeder and poked her index finger in and out of each puncture hole in the thick plexi-glass, watching the bird seed spill out onto the grass. She scattered the remaining seed over the ground and brought the empty feeder inside.

She sealed the holes with duct tape and kept the feeder indoors to send the bears a message. After a few weeks of no bear raids, she hung it up again and hoped only the birds would return. The bears were more determined than she had given them credit for. Once it was established that she was going to keep getting birdseed out to the yard one way or another, they kept coming back. She became adept at guessing when they were likely to show up. There was a sense of satisfaction whenever she startled them, forcing them to drop the feeder as they took off over the fence. She felt like she was a pawn in a game that the animals were close to winning. The scenario played out repeatedly until the end of August, when finally the birdfeeder disappeared. All that remained were pieces of plexi-glass, green plastic, a couple of broken springs, and shredded duct tape at the base of the fence. She watched her dog chow down on a pile of birdseed speckled bear scat; checkmate.

She sat down on the stump that had once supported the grain elevator, rested her elbows on her knees and slowly gave up on the idea of creating a haven for birds. There was that knot in her chest again. A small pile of birdseed lay at the base of the fence marking the

place where the bears had made their get-away. She threw the springs and duct tape at it and went inside.

Over the next few days, she noticed that the birds kept coming back to peck at the seeds hidden in the lawn. For some reason there seemed to be more birds, even without the birdfeeder, so she started to scatter cupfuls of seed over parts of the backyard every other day. The bears came back once or twice, but it seemed the amount of birdseed on the grass was not worth the effort so they moved on. Eventually small stalks of sunflowers, wheat, and other grains sprouted up randomly in the lawn.

There was no wine sipping on a chaise-lounge but she found that if she sat quietly on the deck stairs, the birds would come within inches and eat the birdseed she tossed out to them. The squirrel and crows made appearances. There was a level of communication going on between the animals, as if they were in agreement that there was no need to squabble with so much seed tossed all over the place.

It wasn't perfect, but maybe that was okay. Her grandparents died a long time ago and they would never know about her pointless effort to contain where the birds ate whatever she offered them. Her mother rarely came for visits, so no risk there of frustrating her with evidence of failed attempts at beautiful order. She smiled as she sat on the deck, quietly watching the lovely chaos of life.



Fig. 7.

The Offering

Oil on board and tin, 14in x 7.5in, 2016.

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